

NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION - No. 20

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

BI-MONTHLY

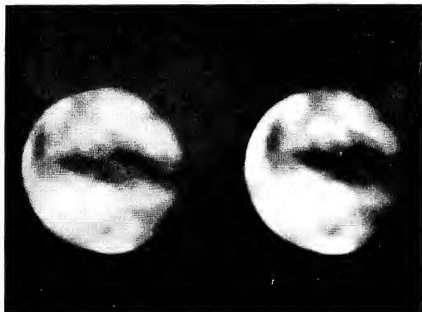
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NUMBER 20



F. G. RAYER'S LATEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

NEBULA PHOTO FEATURE



THE MODERN MARS

by KENNETH JOHNS

Astronomers are now completing a Marswide survey of the Martian enigma—a survey sparked off by the recent closest approach of the Red Planet in 32 years.

Inundated by a wealth of observations, astronomers are ploughing through their massed data in an attempt to understand some of the mysteries of Mars. Their deadline is June, 1957, when the International Mars Committee meets.

During the 1954 dress rehearsal, Mars came fairly close; but could be seen clearly only from the Earth's Southern Hemisphere which is notoriously lacking in large astronomical telescopes.

Then, at the end of August, 1956, as Mars approached for the nearest conjunction or 35,163,000 miles, it was seen that the Red Planet was not living up to its name. First Japanese and then other astronomers saw that the face of Mars was veiled by dense yellow dust clouds.

These clouds, which turned the thin atmosphere of Mars into thick ochre soup, made all observation difficult. It was as though the planet was deliberately hiding his secrets. There were other colour changes from normal, too. The usual dark green patches, which are considered to be a low-lying lichenous type of vegetation, were a drab neutral grey.

The two photographs of Mars above were made on 23rd August, 1956, at a distance of 40,000,000 miles. Taken with a 16mm movie camera attached to the 60-inch telescope of Mount Wilson, with a 30-second exposure every 30 seconds. The two photographs were taken 40 minutes apart during which time Mars rotated 10 degrees.

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

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Look here . . .

Well, in spite of the gloomy foreboding in my last editorial we all appear to be still going strong and the powers that be have decided not to go ahead with blowing up the world yet awhile for which, I suppose, we should all be truly thankful.

In spite of a comparatively peaceful international scene however there has once again been violent re-organisation in the production of NEBULA. After much consideration we have once again asked a different firm to print the magazine and feel sure that this change will make certain a really regular and dependable bi-monthly appearance for the magazine in future. I realise only too well how irritating it is when you can never be certain just when your favourite magazine is about to appear—especially when there are so few other science fiction magazines of a similar quality to fall back on—and have taken this step in response to requests from a number of readers who were finding that they were missing issues due to the former irregularity of the magazine. This, I sincerely believe is one trouble which is behind all of us now.

The change of printers coincides with the inauguration of the new scientific photograph feature which I have been forecasting so loudly in past issues. This is another new idea to be presented for the very first time in any science fiction magazine in this issue of NEBULA and I am sure that you will agree that it lends a heightened touch of distinction to the magazine. In each issue this feature will present the very latest information, illustrated by both drawings and photographs, on all matters of scientific interest with special reference to space travel and the planets written by men in the very forefront of scientific research.

Another innovation in this number is a really *long* novel instead of a shorter novel and novelette to accompany our short stories. Do you prefer this to our usual line-up? If you do, drop me a line to say so and I will do my best to select something outstanding and lengthy for the future. Whatever your feelings as to their lengths, I am sure you will agree that the quality of the stories in this issue is as high as ever. F. G. Rayner has given us another really first-class science fiction adventure yarn—the kind of thing which established him as one of NEBULA's outstanding authors a couple of years ago. It is nice to have you back F.G., come again soon! Another author who seems to have been gone for a very long time but who has in fact only been absent from the pages of one, our 19th issue, is our very own E. C. Tubbs. "Man of Imagination" sees his welcome return with a really unusual type of story which has a most unexpected twist to it. After you read this one I am sure you will ask me to carry on printing a Tubbs story in every issue but unfortunately what with several appearances in the American market and a great deal of other literary work at home it seems possible that stories by this author may become something of a rarity in future. Naturally I will do all in my power to prevent this from becoming the case in NEBULA.

I think that anyone with any writing or editorial experience will understand just what another of our top writers, Wm. F. Temple, is getting at in "Better Than We Know." I myself have seen this kind of thing happening to a *very* limited degree—I only hope that I will live to see the fulfilment of what Mr. Temple envisages myself—who knows, the seed may already have been planted by someone even now.

The rest of this issue is made up of two short yarns by John Ashcroft and D. M. Schneider—two names to look out for as I am sure you will agree when you have read their respective pieces—as well as all the usual interest and review features. I hope you will enjoy this issue and can say at last with confidence—See You All In Two Months' Time.

Peter Hamilton

Man of Imagination

He had found a haven for criminals on the planet Ganda—theoretically, at least.

Illustrated by M. Somerville.

The green fleck on the radar screen hadn't altered in size for three days now and Lieutenant Polton was getting discouraged.

"I can't understand it," he grumbled. "Police craft are supposed to be able to overtake anything in space. How come that Broman can hold his lead?"

"He's in a souped-up sports model." Captain Wheeland didn't appear to be worried. "He torched his jets when he spotted us." He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette. "Don't fret, he'll get what's coming to him."

"Maybe." Polton glowered at the position screen showing the swirling kaleidoscope of hyper-space. He was younger than Wheeland and took it as a personal challenge that Broman should have eluded capture for so long. He said so. Wheeland shrugged.

"Broman was clever," he admitted, "but not clever enough. He had the imagination to commit the crime but not enough to foresee

the inevitable result." He blew smoke against the shining instruments. "That's the trouble with criminals," he said conversationally. "They know before they commit the crime that we'll catch up with them but they go ahead just the same. Even at that Broman was more clever than most. He had a get-away ship planned and ready."

"Dirty wife-killer!" Polton glared at the radar screen as if the green fleck personalised the fugitive which, in a way, it did. "He should be burned."

"He'll suffer when we catch him." Wheeland tensed in his chair as the swirling colours shifted to a new pattern. On the radar screen the green fleck abruptly began to increase in size.

"He's breaking out!" Polton wet his lips in anticipation. "Now we'll get him for sure."

"No we won't." The captain relaxed again as he recognised the pattern. "He's making for Ganda."

"What's the difference?" Polton was busy with the controls. "We'll track him and follow him down. Even if he does make planetfall he can't escape us now. We'll catch him and then he'll either submit to arrest or we'll burn him down." From his expression it was obvious which course the lieutenant preferred.

"Wrong." Wheeland grunted as Polton threw the ship out of hyper-space. In the far distance the rocket trail of the fugitive made a line towards a big, mottled planet. Wheeland reached out and cut their own acceleration.

"He's getting away!" Polton was horrified. He, like all the police, had been thoroughly indoctrinated with the concept that, at all costs, the law must get its man.

"That's Ganda," said Wheeland patiently. "An independent planet attached to the federation from which there is no extradition. We can't catch Broman before he makes planetfall and, once he touches down, the local authorities will protect him from us."

"So he's safe." Polton sounded his disgust. "So the dirty murderer has got away with it."

"I wouldn't say that." Wheeland stared thoughtfully at Ganda. "No, I wouldn't say that at all. Broman thinks he has, of course, and so does every other criminal who manages to land there, but I wouldn't say that they get away with anything."

"How do you mean?" Polton looked perplexed. As the younger officer he knew that he lacked Wheeland's experience. He was beginning to realise that he lacked his knowledge, too.

"There is no death penalty on Ganda," said the captain. "They will neither execute Broman or allow him to be executed. Most

criminals know that and, when things get hot for them, make a bee-line to Ganda. What they don't take into account is that the Gandians are a very law-abiding race." He reached for the controls. "Let's go home."

"I don't get it." Polton was more perplexed than ever. "You mean we just give up the chase and forget Broman?"

"That's right." Wheeland chuckled as he threw the ship into hyper-space.

"What are you laughing about?"

"I was thinking of Broman," explained the captain. "Broman and his imagination."

At that very moment Charles Broman was thinking of the same thing. He chuckled as he saw the green flock of the police ship suddenly vanish as it left normal space for hyper-space and, for the first time in days, allowed himself to relax. It had been close, too close, but things had worked out right in the end. And it was due, of course, to his well-developed imagination.

It took more than brains to plan and execute a murder. Killing was nothing, the dumbest moron could do that, but getting away with it was something else. Police procedures, being what they were, only a man stupid to the point of insanity or one absolutely drunk with his own self-confidence would attempt murder in the first place. Broman was neither, he was merely a man with a gift for extrapolating the most fantastic possibilities from any given situation.

It was a common enough gift, most people had imagination, but Broman's was peculiar in its intensity. He could imagine murdering his wife for the money she refused to let him handle. He could imagine the fun and games he would have with that money once it was wholly his. He could also imagine the penalty for failure. It was the last which had kept his wife alive for three extra years. Broman had an inflated love of his own skin and the very thought of death brought him out into a cold sweat.

But then he had learned of Ganda and the sanctuary it offered and the risk of execution had diminished to a point where the immediate benefits of murder had become paramount.

He hummed to himself as he sent the ship towards the planet, his hawk-face and thin body stooped over the controls. He wasn't an experienced pilot but then he didn't have to be. Automatic selectors had guided him to his destination and ground-based computers would guide him down to a perfect landing. They took over when he was

still ten thousand miles above the surface, and Borman relaxed even further.

Ganda, he thought as the ship settled and "died," was going to be a wonderful place.

The reception committee consisted of three Gandians, all male, and Borman felt his heart warm as he looked at them. They were fat, round, jolly looking men as near human as made no difference and the leader spoke better Terran than he did.

"Welcome to Ganda, Mr. Borman," said one. "My name is Zlen. May I come inside?"

"Certainly." Borman looked towards the other two but they made no move to enter the ship. Shrugging he led Zlen into the cabin. He wasn't surprised that his arrival was expected, the police would have sent out a stop-and-arrest order on the sub-radio. Of more interest was what Zlen intended to do about it.

"We are not concerned with your past, Mr. Borman," said the Gandian in reply to the question. "Only with your future. That is why I am here."

"Pleased to meet you." Borman had no desire to antagonise the natives. "Would you like anything? Smoke? Drink?"

"No thank you." Zlen looked at the comfortable appointments of the cabin, sighed, sat down and looked at the Terrestrial. "We, Gandians are a law-abiding race, Mr. Borman," he said. "We do not have the death penalty but, you understand, we have our own methods of punishment for any who violate our laws."

"Fair enough." Borman eased his collar. "But I haven't violated any of your laws," he pointed out. "I've just landed."

"My remarks were in the nature of a warning," said Zlen mildly. "It is important that you understand that, while we are not concerned with your past, yet if you merit punishment your previous crimes will be taken into account."

"But no death penalty," said Borman quickly. "That's what you said, isn't it?"

"You will not be executed," assured Zlen. He glanced around the cabin again. "You have money, Mr. Borman?"

"I have." Borman felt a quiet pride. "Plenty of Terrestrial script and, of course, this ship. I expect that it will find a ready buyer and, as I won't be using it again, I may as well turn it into cash."

"A wise decision." Zlen reached into his pocket and produced a

thick book. "I would advise you to study our laws, Mr. Broman. You will find this book most helpful."

"Thank you." Broman took it, hefted it in his hand and frowned at the closely printed pages. Studying it promised to be a long job and he said so. Zlen shrugged.

"You are at perfect liberty to leave, Mr. Broman. But if you remain on Ganda then you must abide by our laws."

"Not much of a choice, is it?" Broman hefted the book again. "Well, I guess I'll get along. Is there anything else?"

"No." Zlen rose to his feet and stepped towards the exit. At the threshold he paused, conflicting emotions struggling in his eyes. "Mr. Broman."

"Yes?"

"Is it true that you slaughtered your mate?"

Broman didn't answer.

The Gandian legal system was simple in that it followed the principle that a law wasn't a law unless breaking it was a crime and a crime wasn't a crime unless it was attended by a penalty. Most of the penalties were ludicrous, a minor fine or a few hours public display seemed to be the usual punishment. For natives at least, for those seeking sanctuary the warning Zlen had given about previous crimes being taken into consideration was repeated at intervals throughout the book. Try as he might Broman could find no clear-cut penalty for murder. It, together with other heinous crimes, appeared to be covered by the ambiguous statement that the punishment would be dictated by the personality of the criminal. But there was no death penalty, he made certain of that.

Three days later he felt confident enough to leave the ship, contact a native lawyer and arrange for the sale of the vessel and the converting of his Terrestrial script into local currency. While negotiations were being completed Broman went on a sight-seeing tour of the single, main city.

He was a little surprised to find no Terrestrials though, when he thought about it, it wasn't so surprising after all. Escape to Ganda presupposed both intelligence and imagination. Not many criminals would have the foresight to plan a get-away to the one planet where they would be safe. And yet Ganda was well known and, over the years, quite a few men-on-the-run must have reached it. Broman frowned as he thought about it. He was still frowning when he heard an unmistakable Terrestrial voice at his elbow.

"Light, mister?"

"Certainly." Broman turned, his lighter extended, then forgot the request as he stared at the man before him. "Quentin! Mark Quentin! Of all the people—" He laughed with sheer enjoyment.

"You know me?" Quentin took the lighter, lit his cigarette, handed back the expensive instrument.

"Know you!" Broman shook his head. "Five years ago you were the talk of the solar system. The way you lifted that money was the smartest piece of work known." He stared at Quentin, recognising a genius, then his stare sharpened as he took in little signs he had previously ignored.

Quentin was dressed in clothing which had long lost all claim to be either new or clean. His chin was stubbled, his eyes furtive, the cigarette hanging from his lips had obviously been salvaged from a gutter. Quentin had managed to escape to Ganda with almost ten millions in negotiable script. It would take real concentration to spend all that in five years and it would take a genius to spend it and wind up a bum.

Genius or not that was what Quentin, apparently, had done.

"You're new here." Quentin stared at Broman's expensive clothing. "Want to buy some advice?"

"How much advice?"

"As much as you can afford to spare." Quentin spoke around his cigarette. "You may as well be generous while you've got the chance because, take it from me, you won't have it for long."

"No?" Broman was cautious.

"You don't believe me," said Quentin. He didn't seem surprised. He took the cigarette from his mouth and looked at it. "Would you have called me a smart man?"

"One of the smartest." Broman was sincere.

"You'd be wrong. I made the same mistake as you did and paid for it as you're going to pay. Still interested?"

"Maybe." Broman glanced around. They were standing at the edge of a tiny plot of grass. Narrow paths wound over the lawn and seats were set at irregular intervals. "Let's sit down while you tell me."

Seated Broman fumbled out his wallet and slipped out some of the crisp, new currency he had just acquired. Quentin took it, stuffed it into a pocket, and stared thoughtfully down at his feet.

"When you landed someone met you, gave you a warning and passed you a book, right?"

Broman nodded.



"That's the gimmick." Quentin stared at his companion. "Now you know it all."

"Like hell I do." Broman flushed with anger. "What is this, a con game?" He gestured with the wallet he still held in his hand. The leather struck Quentin's shoulder and fell to the ground.

"It's no con game." Quentin stooped, picked up the wallet and stared at the name stamped in gold on one corner. "Broman. Is that you?"

Naturally." Broman snatched back the wallet.

"The wife-killer." Quentin sucked air between his teeth. "I read about you on the post-board. A dirty, stinking woman-killer." There was no mistaking the raw contempt in his voice. And I was going to help you!"

"You needn't bother." Broman jerked to his feet, Quentin followed him. "I can do without the advice of a no-good bum."

"Sure you can." Quentin smiled without humour. Deliberately he reached out, pushed, and Broman, off-balance, staggered back from the path onto the grass. "That's for you," said Quentin. "So long, sucker."

Puzzled, Broman watched him walk away.

He didn't remain puzzled for long. Two men, dressed in a severe uniform approached him as he stepped from the tiny park.

"Mr. Broman, I have to inform you that you are under arrest for violation of law number 18/53/172; wanton damage to cultivated vegetation." The speaker nodded to his companion. Broman stared in horror at the handcuffs circling his wrists.

"This is monstrous!" Vainly he tugged at the unyielding metal. "All I did was to tread on the grass and only that because of an accident."

"The court will hear your pleas."

"But I didn't even know that it was a crime!" Broman raised his voice. "You can't arrest a man for a thing like that!"

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse." The speaker jerked his head. "I must warn you that unless you agree to come quietly we shall use force."

Broman stopped arguing.

The three days he spent in a cell waiting for trial afforded plenty of time for thought. He was allowed a lawyer, the Gandians were scrupulous as to the letter of the law, but the man offered no hope.

"It's a clear cut case," he said after having heard the testimony of the arresting officers. "You were seen, by witnesses, to deliberately cause wanton damage to cultivated vegetation, namely the grass in the park. Do you deny that?"

"I claim mitigating circumstances." Broman knew that it was impossible to deny the fact that he had stood on the grass. "I was pushed from the path. If the officers saw me on the grass then they must have seen Quentin push me."

"The charge isn't concerned with you getting on the grass," said the lawyer patiently. He, like everyone else Broman had come into contact with, seemed to have little regard for the Terrestrial. "Had you jumped from where you stood back onto the path you would not have been arrested. But instead of that you walked on the grass down to the road and so caused the wanton damage."

"It's a racket," said Broman.

"It is the law." The lawyer was stiff. "May I remind you that, when you landed, you were met, warned and given a book containing our laws. Ignorance, as you know, is no excuse." He gathered up his papers. "I suggest a plea of guilty, the penalty is a minor one."

"That's what you think." Broman was bitter. "What about the gimmick of taking my other crimes into consideration?"

The lawyer shrugged. Quite obviously he wasn't the least interested in Broman's personal problems.

Alone, Broman sat and thought it out. The entire system was, as he saw now, a racket. Quentin had tried to warn him, had warned him, but the warning even if understood had come too late. Broman was caught in one of the neatest legal snares ever devised.

He cursed as he thought about it, blaming his imagination, or lack of it, for his predicament. Ganda offered sanctuary to any and all criminals and no questions asked. Obviously any criminal who managed to escape to Ganda wouldn't arrive empty handed, the ship he came in was alone worth a fortune. No man, certainly no stranger, could hope to avoid breaking a minor law for long and when he did then the natives moved in. The minor charge out of the way they concentrated on taking previous crimes into consideration. There would be a heavy fine, naturally, that accounted for Quentin's poverty, and the hapless visitor would be financially stripped to the bone.

There was, Broman supposed, a certain poetic justice to it. Criminals were not, usually, good members of society and the Gandians were highly law-abiding. They tolerated their visitors only because of the revenue they brought with them. What hurt was the fact that, even after suffering the local punishment, a man still couldn't leave the planet. If he did then he would have to face the very charges he had run away from.

Broman sighed and tried to find comfort in the fact that, no matter what happened to him here, it couldn't be worse than what he had run away from. Murderers were still executed on the federation worlds but Ganda had no death penalty.

It was a comforting thought.

The trial went much as Broman expected. Despite the advice of his lawyer he pleaded not guilty then had to listen to the evidence of the arresting officers, the testimony of a gardener and the statement of a botanist. The actual damage was slight, some bruised grass, but it was more than sufficient to prove the charge. The verdict was guilty and then the real trial began.

"As you have claimed sanctuary on Ganda," said the judge, "you are fully aware of your position. However, in order to determine your punishment we must, obviously, establish your guilt as to previous crimes. Will you accept the verdict of this court?"

"Have I any alternative?"

"You can always choose deportation," said the judge blandly. "No? Then we can proceed."

It was more of a testing than a trial. Smooth-faced technicians

attached a mass of wires to Broman's skull, torso and extremities. Recognising a lie detector he made one last protest.

"This isn't fair," he snapped. "What I did before I came to Ganda shouldn't make the slightest difference to the minor crime for which I have been found guilty."

"According to our legal code all previous crimes are taken into consideration when passing sentence." The judge lifted a book, the twin of the one Zlen had given Broman. "You were given a copy of our laws, were you not?"

"Yes, but it isn't fair."

"It is legal." The judge leaned forward, his voice no longer bland. "We are a decent, law-abiding race, Mr. Broman. Many visitors come to us and all are welcome. Some of them may have committed crimes on their own worlds, crimes we do not recognise as such, those people have nothing to fear. But Ganda is not and will never be a refuge for the scum of the universe. Need I say more?"

Broman grunted. The judge, he thought, had already said enough. He remained silent as the technicians fussed around him and then the questions began.

They were shrewd questions and they cut deep. The examiners knew their business and they went about it in a cold-blooded way which soon had Broman writhing in his chair. They weren't satisfied with a simple admission of guilt, they probed even deeper, and most of their questions centred around the reasons for what he had done rather than the thing itself.

Why had he killed his wife? Why had he waited so long before killing her? Why had he tried to make the death seem like an accident? Why had he come to Ganda? Why? Why? Why?

By the time they had finished Broman felt that he had been put through a mental mangle and squeezed dry.

After the ordeal there was a period during which time seemed to have stopped while the judge conferred with technicians, colleagues and several thick tomes. For a moment Broman toyed with the wild idea of escape but the solid presence of uniformed police cured him of that. They were unarmed but they were big enough and strong enough to tear him apart.

"Mr. Broman." The judge had arrived at a decision. "In view of the nature of your previous crime, a crime duplicated in part during your stay here, you present a social and a moral problem. The desire to destroy is strong within you, human life and vegetation have both suffered from your actions."

Sophistry, thought Broman. The legal mind twisting words to

make an innocent action seem diabolical. He listened without surprise to the amount of his fine, it was carefully based on the amount of his wealth and would leave him a pauper. He jerked to full attention at the second part of his punishment.

"What! What did you say?"

"Please pay attention, Mr. Broman." The judge was remarkably patient. "I said that, as it is inconceivable that you should be allowed freedom to injure the innocent, you will be taken from this court to a place prepared for you and there you will meet your death."

"No!" Broman felt blackness edge around him and the cold sweat of fear ooze from his body. "You can't do that! There is no death-penalty on Ganda!"

"You will not be executed by process of law," explained the judge. "But you will meet your death in the place prepared for you." He rose. "That is all."

Broman thought it a damn sight too much.

The room was comfortable in its fashion. A box, twenty feet long, ten wide, ten high. There was a bed, cupboards, toilet facilities and the usual furniture. Light came from a panel set flush with the ceiling and air came through a grill. There were no windows.

Broman sat on a chair and let his imagination take over. The journey from the court had been made in silence, the guards hadn't spoken even when they had unlocked the cell and thrown him inside. If it hadn't been for what the judge had said Broman would have imagined himself merely sentenced to solitary confinement.

"You will meet your death in the place prepared for you."

There could be no mistaking the threat. There could be no mistaking the fact that this place had been made ready for him since the day he landed. The Gandians, damn them, had known he would wind up in their courts. Broman cursed as he thought about it then, suddenly, he collapsed into the chair.

There was no death-penalty on Ganda—and yet he was to meet his death in this room. The natives were masters of sophistry, their legal system proved that and, as long as they stuck to the letter of the law they felt free to ignore the spirit. They wouldn't execute him, true, but what if he should execute himself?

What if the room had been booby-trapped?

It made more than sense, it made cold, sober logic. Give a child a loaded pistol and, if the child kills himself, are you responsible? Morally perhaps, legally no, and the Gandians were masters of legal-

ity. They could have gimmicked this room so that, eventually, Broman would trigger something that, somehow, would kill him. They could do that and still claim, with justice, that they had not enforced a death penalty. They would not have executed Broman, he, by sheer bad luck, would have killed himself.

He sweated as he stared about the room, his imagination in full working order. That cupboard, if he opened it, might release a gas through the air-grill. That cabinet could contain a bomb. The toilet . . .

He forced himself to some measure of control. The room was booby-trapped, all right, but there would only be the one trap. More would defeat the Gandians sense of justice because, as far as they were concerned, Broman had to be given a chance. Therefore the trap wouldn't be something which he had to trip no matter what. That left out the toilet, the cupboard doors, the bed, the cabinets, the furniture he would have to use every day.

Hunger reminded him that he hadn't eaten for too long now. He paused before a cupboard, took a deep breath and opened it. Nothing happened and he stared at the ranked cans of food he recognised as having come from the stores of his ship. He selected a can of chicken, then paused as he was about to open it. The light was soft and deceptive but he could see no signs that the can had been tampered with. Still, that meant nothing, they could have gimmicked the container.

Desperately he thrust his thumb against the seal, his heart almost stopping at the hiss of air. Was it air entering a vacuum, or gas escaping, or ? The food seemed normal but how could he be certain ? For all he knew it could be alive with induced ptomaines. And yet he had to eat, if he didn't eat he would die. But if he did eat then he might die anyway, the warning had been plain enough.

Broman sat down and, head in hands, suffered a thousand imaginary deaths.

A moron wouldn't have suffered as Broman did, but then a moron wouldn't have been given his punishment. A more intelligent man wouldn't have suffered either, but then a more intelligent man wouldn't have killed his wife. The Gandians were logical, clever and strictly truthful. Broman would meet his death in the place prepared for him.

He would die of old age.

One Man

*In enlightened future days even the most
unscrupulous men will have a duty to society.*

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson.

Crampton strained against the enmeshing tentacles. In the dim, half-light he could just see the writhing shape of the obscene body. The dream had a dreadful reality never experienced in the waking state. He could hear his breath rasping in the hollowness of his helmet as he struggled to free his arms.

He reeled, and momentarily he could see the two figures which stood unmoving against the wall . . . watching. As always, the expressions on their faces were masked by the distortion of their helmets.

He freed his right arm with a heart-bursting wrench of energy and pulled the blaster out of his holster. He thrust it into the black mass and pulled the firing lever. The recoil was a smashing agony in his strained muscles.

An eon of suffocating time passed. The pressure on his body relaxed and he pushed the thing away. He turned, lips bared. The blaster ready to answer those who had refused to help him those who had watched. But they had gone they were always gone.

The scene changed abruptly. He was in headlong flight down a long corridor. He came to a metal door. He pulled it open, small sounds of fear spilling from his mouth like the saliva of an idiot. Panic

at his heels, the unknown ahead, he thrust forward

He screamed . His helmet vibrated with the sound . And shattered.

The scream was soundless now, as the ravening vacuum tore bloody breath from burst lungs.

He died again

Crampton lay for a moment, nursing the precious oblivion. Reluctantly his consciousness was forced to acknowledge the impulses that flowed inwards from a million nerve endings The hardness of the couch beneath him, the clammy perspiration that enveloped his body. Through closed lids he could sense the light that glared down on his face. The light dimmed slightly.

"Crampton I know you're awake," said a soft, deep voice.

He opened his eyes. The dark jowl, the heavy lips twisted in a broad mouthed smile, struck a chord of hate. He stared into the brown, clouded eyes. His exhausted body rallied again, pouring out aggressive energy to smash its tormentor. Hopelessly he was bound hand and foot.

"You swine ! You put it in !" Crampton's voice was a groan of agony, his face twisting with futile hate.

Peinture shook his head slowly: "No I only observe. It is all your own . You created it."

"But why ? Why ?" he pleaded.

Peinture smiled again and his broad features passed out of range of the other's vision. With deft fingers he removed the probes from the shaven head of the hard featured young man on the couch.

Crampton closed his eyes again—not to sleep, but to escape the repeated frustration of seeing the hated face. He heard the click of a switch.

Peinture said :

"Right . . . You can collect Crampton now. I'm finished with him for today ."

He lay limp and unresisting as the two orderlies picked him ungently from the couch and placed him on the stretcher trolley.

"Where to, Doc ?" asked the taller of the two, in a gruff voice.

"Take him back to his ward," said Peinture. "He'll be all right in a couple of hours."

"What the hell does he do to them in there ?" said the new orderly as he pushed the trolley along the corridor. "This poor devil looks all in."

"Don't waste your sympathy on this baby," said the other, a brutish giant with hairy arms. "Doc Peinture has got his own ideas



on therapy—nobody interferes. They're all ten time losers here and tough. Take this one here; he killed another prisoner only a couple of weeks ago, when the pair of them were out on dome polishing detail . ."

Crampton listened bleakly. Life always trapped him like that; it would do no good to protest that he had been forced to kill Borg in order to save himself. The man had conceived some crazy idea that by stealing Crampton's oxygen bottle he would have a large enough supply to escape.

Escape to the Soviet dome, twenty miles away, was the constant aim of the prisoners at Moon Corrective Establishment. As far as Crampton knew, none had ever succeeded—and it was doubtful what sort of a reception they would receive, even if they did. But anything would be better than life at MCE; with its hard, dangerous work and the dreaded therapy sessions.

Without the therapy sessions, the existence would have been more tolerable. At least a man could see some object in working, even as a near slave, on such projects as the Moon Space Port, but the therapy seemed to serve no purpose other than to satisfy the sadistic mind of Peinture.

Crampton strained at his bonds again, as he thought of the dark, gloating face. "Hey, what about loosening these straps?" he said

to the orderlies.

The big one sneered down at him. "What are you beefing about? you've got it soft here, you cons. People are starving on Mars. decent people, and you swine are living off the fat of the land."

Crampton stifled the curses that rose in his throat and lay in silence for the rest of the journey.

The big orderly stood with his blaster at the ready as the other unstrapped Crampton and opened the door of the ward. Crampton walked inside slowly. At one time the ward would have been known as a cell, but the euphemism was a salve to the humanitarian conscience of the people back on Earth. Men still paid dearly for their sins against society, but the facade of treatment rather than punishment must be maintained at all costs.

Crampton dragged his protesting body onto his bunk and glanced at the two men with whom he was doomed to spend the rest of his life.

Locke, a little weasel of a man, was sitting in the corner playing some endless game of patience with a pack of greasy cards. He looked up and nodded.

Mackeson was sitting on the edge of his bunk, elbows on his knees staring dully at nothing. Crampton found himself doubting if the big man had moved once while he had been outside the ward. Mackeson had been a killer, a blustering braggart conscious of his physical power—but under the bludgeoning of constant therapy he had retreated into apathy.

A panel in the wall next to Mackeson slid open.

Five o'clock, thought Crampton, automatically, the afternoon meal. Things were always on time at MCE. Mackeson lurched to his feet and walked over to the food hatch. Locke picked up his cards carefully and stowed them underneath his bunk. Crampton lay still, watching, his body revolted at the thought of food after the drugs Peinture had pumped into him.

Mackeson picked up the big plastic container which held the three men's rations and carried it over to the table. He sat down in front of it and commenced to cram food into his large mouth with animal greed.

Locke walked towards him and looked down over his shoulder.

"You'd think they could serve up these concentrates in a different way occasionally, just to make a change," he said, half humorously. Crampton watched disinterestedly as Locke thrust a thin hand down into the container—the gambit was too well worn to warrant any reply.

Mackeson, still stuffing food into his mouth with his left hand, reached out and pushed Locke away from the table.

"Hey ! What's the idea, Mac ?" said Locke shrilly.

The big man ignored him and continued his meal.

"Did you see that ?" said Locke, turning appealing to Crampton. "What's the matter with this guy ? That food is for all of us, he knows that."

Crampton shrugged. Locke turned back to the man at the table.

"Hey, Mac ! Come on feller, let's get at it," he whined. "I know I moan about it, but a man's got to eat."

The big man had already finished one complete portion and was starting another. Locke moved forward with birdlike indignation. He reached down for the remaining plate.

Mackeson's expression was unchanged as he lumbered to his feet and picked up the protesting little man. He held Locke at arms length for a moment, then without a word, threw him against the wall opposite. Locke hit the wall with a thud and fell to the floor stunned.

Mackeson resumed his seat at the table and continued his meal as if nothing had happened. Locke's face was pale with fear and anger as he lifted himself painfully to his feet.

He looked up at the lens of the ceiling spy camera, and appealed to authority. "Hey, you there, if you're watching Did you see that—hasn't a man got any rights in this place ?" He slunk cautiously along the wall and lowered himself painfully onto his bunk. His eyes were narrow with hate as he mouthed silent curses at the big man's indifferent back.

He was lying on a pile of filthy rags in the corner of a stinking, dark room. His hands moved to pull the single thin garment he was wearing closer about him then explored the distended belly, downwards to the thin legs with swollen joints. He was a child again

And this was home home the word was a curse.

He could hear the sound of angry, drunken voices in the next room. He lifted h'mself to his feet shivering with cold and the hunger that was his constant childhood companion. The uneven boards creaked under his bare feet as he crept towards the door.

He placed a trembling, grimy paw on the handle and turned it. He pulled the door towards him. The man and woman in the room beyond snarled and spat at each other like two horribly articulate animals. He shouted to them, his voice a piping crackle forced through an inflamed throat.

They turned, the'r duet of hate ceased and then focused on the intruder. He staggered against the lintel And screamed his

hate back at them, his falsetto adding horrible impact to the filthy blasphemies they had taught him

Crampton crawled up to consciousness and opened his eyes. Locke sat at the table, nibbling away like an overgrown rat at a piece of food. He leered across as Crampton stirred and pointed with his free hand. Mackeson's bunk was empty.

"That's the last we'll see of that big oaf," said the little man maliciously. "They came and collected him about an hour ago he's for his final, I guess."

Crampton shuddered and heaved his aching body off the bunk. If Mackeson was headed for the euthanasia chamber, maybe he was lucky. One fist pressed to his throbbing temples, he walked over and poured himself a drink of water. He gulped it down greedily.

There was a click of a lock and the door of the ward swung open. Crampton caught a brief glance of the heavy featured orderly who pushed the wiry, fair haired young man inside and then it closed again.

Locke regarded the youngster with a twisted grin. "Well what do you know—a new boy! Look, Crampton he's still got his hair! What's your name, kid?"

Crampton took in the thin lips and narrow grey eyes of the newcomer. He could not be more than about twenty, but he had the brassy hardness of the habitual social misfit.

"Here, come and have some chow, kid," said Locke. "My name is Locke—the chunky character there is Crampton. Looks like we'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on."

"Cut out the *kid* routine," grated the newcomer. "The name's Daly—Mister, to you, shorty." He stared his resentment at the two men.

Then, without warning, the shell that had lasted him up to this, the last lap of an incorrigible criminal's career, cracked. The lines of his face flowed, softening and he slumped to the floor. He lay face downwards, his back heaving with great retching sobs. Crampton moved forward.

Locke waved him back. "Leave him to work it out his own way for a while . . . He'll be O.K."

When the boy finally pulled himself shamefacedly to his feet, Crampton realised that the hardness was gone probably forever. He walked over and thrust out his hand.

"Glad to have you with us, Daly We're going to get along just fine—aren't we?" The boy shook gratefully. "Here, come on . . . have something to eat," continued Crampton. He led Daly over to the table.

"How long have you two been here?" asked Daly. "What's it like—is it really as bad as they say?"

Locke grinned. "We've been here long enough and you'll find out what it's like."

"Where are you from, Daly?" said Crampton.

"All over . . . London mostly," said the boy, pushing his tousled curls back out of his eyes.

Locke hunched forward, eagerly. "Tell us about it, kid. We never hear anything here—how are things on Earth nowadays?"

Peinture leaned over Crampton and adjusted the couch to a sitting position. The prisoner's hands strained at their bonds as the dark face passed over them. He watched warily as the Psyche pulled over a chair and sat opposite him.

"Relax, Crampton," said Peinture smiling. "This time is going to be different. No needles . . . no probes, just you and I having a quiet little chat."

Crampton tensed himself, wondering what refined mental torture was to come.

"Incidentally," said Peinture casually. "How do you feel about me?"

"I just love your bonny brown eyes," said Crampton with a sneer. "What happened to Mackeson?"

Peinture shrugged. "Be sensible—*what* do you care what happened to Mackeson? Forget about him . . . think about yourself. *You're* the only one who matters to you." He pulled a cigarette case out of his pocket and selected one carefully. He held the case out to Crampton. "Oh, of course, your hands . . . Never mind . . . some other time, maybe." He returned it to his pocket.

He inhaled deeply, his brown eyes on Crampton. He puffed out a cloud of memory stirring smoke. "You had a wife back on Earth, I believe?"

Crampton's throat tightened. "Sure, I had a wife . . . You've got it all in my file, who are you trying to kid?"

Peinture reached over to his desk and picked up a yellow folder. "Yes, of course," he said, leafing through the folder. He pulled out a postcard sized photograph. "Yes, Ruth . . . isn't it? A nice looking girl . . ."

Crampton stared at the back of the photograph—praying that Peinture would not show it to him—he doubted if his control could hold out against that.

Peinture mused silently over the picture for a long moment, then

replaced it carefully in the folder. Crampton relaxed.

"I wanted to talk to you about your wife, Crampton," he said, slowly. "It's tough for a girl like her young, attractive to have a husband up at MCE. To know that the chances are that she will never see him again

Crampton's heart thumped against his ribs—his lips moved soundlessly.

"The law takes such situations into account," continued Peinture. "So it is not difficult for a woman in her position to obtain a divorce; a quick, clean break that gives her a chance to forget the past and start a new, happier life."

Crampton struggled for control. "When did it happen?" he asked in a flat voice.

"About three months ago," said Peinture. "You must agree that it was the most sensible thing for her to do."

Three months! She had not wasted much time—and this was the girl for whom he had risked everything and lost. Crampton clenched his teeth; Peinture would not have the enjoyment of hearing him whine.

Peinture pulled over a small table, upon which stood a solidograph projector. "I thought these shots might interest you," he said as he walked over and dimmed the lights. "They were taken on Earth a couple of weeks ago."

Crampton watched with a horrible fascination as the Psyche switched on the projector and the doll sized images began to form. The tiny replicas of Ruth and the man who held her in his arms were instantly recognisable.

"Shall I switch in the sound?" Peinture's hand moved to the side of the projector. "It always makes them more lifelike, don't you think?"

Crampton turned his head. "Switch the damned thing off, you swine!" he shouted.

There was a light click and the sound of a familiar lilting voice filled the room

He fought frantically in a vain attempt to tear away the tentacles that were crushing the breath from his body Somehow he knew that this time he could not escape The black mass was surging forward, engulfing him

In his last moment of life he saw the two figures standing by the wall. Their helmets were no longer opaque He could see their faces and the expressions that always before had been hidden

They were laughing contemptuously and both of them were

women His mother and Ruth. Death was pleasant

Crampton awoke, a scream bubbling in his throat. The hairy arm of the big orderly was on his shoulder, shaking him roughly.

"On your feet, slob. What do you think this is—a rest cure? We've got a job for you and your two buddies."

Crampton heaved himself off the bunk. The scene in the ward held infinitely less reality than the nightmare he had just experienced. He walked slowly to the door. Daly and Locke were standing there, guarded by another orderly with a blaster. Daly looked like a frightened child as he stood there chewing his lower lip.

"Right," said the big orderly. "Let's get going. At the double there—move!"

The three men ran along the corridor, followed by the watchful orderlies. Crampton stumbling, half conscious of his surroundings.

The party halted before the main airlock of the prison dome. A blister topped, crawler tractor towered in front of them like a monstrous turtle.

The big orderly faced the three prisoners, his blaster moving in a menacing arc.

"Right, you three loafers The holiday is over. Now's a good chance for you to earn your keep. About two miles north of here, there's a trailer loaded with ore, left there by the last working party. You three babies are detailed to go out and fetch it."

He pointed to Crampton. "You'll drive the crawler. When you get there, the other two will put on suits and go outside to hitch up the trailer understood?"

Crampton nodded dully.

"Right, you come with me," said the orderly. "The others will collect their suits." They climbed aboard the vehicle. "Think you can handle it?"

Crampton scanned the instrument panel and the simple controls. He nodded. His head felt suddenly clearer.

"There are just the three of us going?" he asked.

The mouth of the orderly twisted in a sneer.

"That's right, but don't get any funny ideas There is just enough oxygen in the tanks to last three of you one hour. If you're not back by then, it will be just too bad."

Crampton checked the instrument panel again. "But what if we have a breakdown?"

"You won't have a breakdown," said the orderly. "Get the motor warmed up."

Crampton sat down at the controls as Daly and Locke climbed

aboard, helmets under their arms.

"Go straight ahead when you get out of the lock," said the orderly. "You'll see the trailer as soon as you make the top of the ridge. Now get moving and don't waste any time." He left the crawler and the three prisoners were once more alone together.

"I don't like this," said Locke, as the throb of the motors filled the cabin. "Why don't they send out a regular working party?"

"Why aren't they sending a guard with us?" asked Daly eagerly. "Maybe . . ."

"Why should they?" said Crampton with a twisted grin. "Where the hell could we run to?"

The boy leaned over his shoulder, looking at the control panel. "The Soviet Dome. There's enough fuel in the tanks."

Crampton pointed to the oxygen gauge. "You're a real bright kid, ain't you . . . How long can you hold your breath?"

Daly's face was pale as he retreated to a seat in the corner of the cabin.

Crampton eased the tractor into gear as the massive inner door of the dome's airlock swung aside. "At least this is better than just sitting around in that damned cage," he said.

The tractor threshed across the bleak lunar landscape at top speed—a snail like five miles an hour.

Daly pressed his nose to the side of the transparent blister like a child in front of a Christmas toy store display. "Hey, look! There's Earth out there. Look, fellers!"

Locke eyed the boy sourly. "Take a good look, kid. This is as close as you'll ever be to it again," he said.

The trailer lay dead ahead, a dark, unmistakable shape on the searing white plain. Crampton turned the crawler and backed up to it. He cut the motor and turned to his companions.

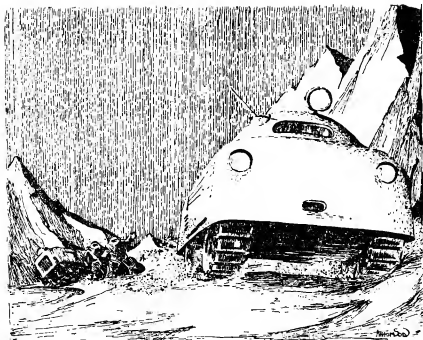
"O.K., you two," he said. "Now it's your turn. Get moving, we haven't got any time to waste."

Daly began preparing himself. . . . then stopped, his eyes wide. "What are they trying to do to us?" he said hoarsely. "The oxygen bottle on this suit is nine tenths empty!"

"That's right," said Locke in alarm. "Mine's just the same."

"Too bad," said Crampton callously. He gazed towards the horizon. *Only eighteen miles away from where he was sitting lay the Soviet Dome. . . . eighteen impossible miles.* "Come on! It's only a two or three minutes' job—you'll make it all right."

The two men eyed him with unconcealed hate as they clamped their helmets in place. He watched quietly as the airlock door closed



behind them . . . then turned and looked at the oxygen gauge.

Escape! What did he owe these men—friendship . . . loyalty? They were expensive concepts . . . too expensive for a man in his position to hold. Air for three men for an hour—air for one man for three hours

The equation rolled over in his mind.

He realised that twenty-five precious minutes were already gone

They were dead men anyway—they would never live any sort of a useful life again

He looked through the blister. They were beside the trailer now, making ready to hitch it to the crawler. Crampton looked at the gauge again.

Maybe there was some reserve . . . maybe. There was no time to check, but anything would be better than going back to MCE To rot and die—to be tortured . . .

His face was a stony mask as he pulled the starting lever. The crawler shuddered with vibration as he slammed it into gear and pulled it in a tight arc. Without stopping to glance at the wildly gesticulating figures of Daly and Locke who stood in the dust behind, he headed for the horizon and sanctuary. Their death was a small thing. His

mind was icy cool now—filled with calm conviction that of all the living beings in the universe, only his own survival was important . .

The crawler ploughed onwards, devouring the miles. Over the rims of craters and across the brilliant shadowless plains. The throbbing of the motor was a song of liberty in his ears. A warm exhilaration began to seep through his coolness. He found himself laughing and singing in tune with the throbbing.

He would be the first man ever to escape from MCE. The crawler lurched up the rocky wall of a crater and stalled. He laughed as he slammed it into reverse. He charged the obstacle again. The heavy vehicle teetered for one sickening moment on the brink . then rolled down the other side.

He felt a happiness such as he had never known before. Nothing could stop him now.

He laughed as the drunkenness of anoxia closed in his mind—and reeled to the floor of the cabin.

With no hand at the controls, the crawler shuddered to a halt.

The MCE Patrol car leapt over the rim of the crater and headed towards the stalled tractor

Peinture rose from behind his desk as the orderlies escorted Crampton into the room. He surveyed the fugitive with his wide mouthed grin.

"Welcome home, Crampton Sit down, will you ?" He turned to the orderlies. "You can go now."

Crampton lowered himself to the edge of the couch, staring dully at the Psyche. He looked down at his hands. They were untied

"Go ahead," said Peinture. "Now is your chance to kill me. You've wanted to for a long time . . haven't you ?"

Crampton surged forward automatically then stopped as he realised that the burning hate, the desire to kill was gone. He slumped back. His only feeling towards the man who faced him, was one of indifference.

"Good !" said Peinture, with a satisfied nod. "You'll do I don't often make mistakes."

"Bring in your killers," said Crampton in a monotone. "Let's get it over with. You can't torture me any more There's no feeling left."

"I know," said Peinture, perching himself on the edge of his desk and smiling down at the prisoner. "Perfect ! I can assure you that I have no intention of executing you. You're much too valuable now."

"I killed two men . . . I tried to escape," said Crampton. "You're wasting your time playing with me, Peinture."

"You *thought* you killed them . . . The intention was sufficient for my purpose," said the Psyche. "Daly and Locke were never in any danger. They were just part of your training programme

Crampton struggled for a glimmer of understanding.

"Training?"

Peinture pulled his cigarette case out of his pocket and offered it to Crampton.

"You were never intended to escape," he said. "We knew you would try, of course. This was just a test . . . And you passed it with flying colours, the first time out."

Crampton took the cigarette and held it between his forefinger and thumb.

"So I passed some kind of test. Where do I go from there—more therapy?" It was not important to him, but he asked.

Peinture offered him a light.

"No, that's finished. Now you're ready for the real job . . . the object of the training. During your time here, you, an already asocial personality, have had all the traumatic experiences that made you that way revived and reinforced. Even the dreams had their purpose; the data contained in them has equal validity to waking experience, as far as the unconscious is concerned.

"In the natural state, the truly asocial being does not exist. Even the most hardened criminal owes some sort of allegiance to a primary group . . . although the group itself fails to interlock with society as a whole. But not you . . . not any more.

"You are now the ultimate asocial being. All the feelings which remained to you have been systematically destroyed, or covered by mental scar tissues of such thickness that you will never again experience normal human affections. Your only interest now is in your own survival . . . and that drive is uninhibited by any other considerations. You have no feeling for—or need of—other human beings."

Crampton puffed the cigarette calmly. He found himself able to review the contents of his mind in a perfectly detached manner and confirm that the Psyche was speaking the truth. There was no feeling of resentment against what had been done to him. He felt in himself a tremendous potential power; a conviction that he was now something more than a man

" . . . It takes one of our freighters over nine months to reach Mars by the cheapest fuel route," continued Peinture. "No normal man can stand the solitude of space for such a period and remain sane.

We've been losing nine out of ten ships and the supply position out there is becoming desperate. The colonists must be fed, but we can't afford to waste men and ships indefinitely."

"Why not use bigger crews?" said Crampton, logically.

"Because this is a one way trip," said Peinture. "The ships are not intended to return. Every remaining ounce of fuel, every particle of metal contained in their hulls is immediately salvaged and put to use in the building of the colony.

"The pilot remains to help in this work. The colonists are living at starvation level now if we sent more than one man on each ship it would be impossible to support them."

Crampton understood at last. He dropped the cigarette to the floor and ground it out with his heel.

"So I'm your custom built pilot . . . What's in it for me?"

Peinture's dark eyes were misted.

"Whatever you make of it. A new life on a new planet . . . You'll never return to MCE ."

Crampton sat in the small, bleak room on Mars and cursed life . . . The trip out had been uneventful and comfortable, as Peinture had predicted. He had received a hero's welcome . . .

The hollow ache in his stomach became a gnawing pain. There were two doors in the room, but one of them was locked. The unlocked one opened onto the almost airless desert.

He knew that within a few hours hunger and thirst would drive him to open that door and seek merciful oblivion . . .

The welcoming committee had explained the position to him with some embarrassment, but firmly. The Martian colonists were considerate, neighbourly people. The one type a frontier society could not use was an asocial man. Out here on Mars, men had to work together and hold each other in some mutual regard; it was necessary for survival.

His continued existence was a luxury that the colony could not afford.

So polite . . . but very, very firm.

Crampton rose and walked slowly towards the door.

D. M. SCHNEIDER

The Men Marched Out

With political propagandists thirsty for new material, significance may be given to even the most trivial events.

"Steve?"

"Well—what now?"

"Steve, you shouldn't be so bad-tempered. And isn't it time to be off?"

He scowled. "Ages yet. Besides, I've set the clock." He continued to eat his dinner with deliberate slowness.

Neither spoke for a while; then, hesitantly, she asked: "If you really detest the job, why don't you get another? See Brimmick about it: hand in your resignation. He'll understand your feelings, I'm sure."

"What? Old Baldy? Like heck he would. In any case, I volunteered for a year, and I've only had six months. If I tried to break that contract, the courts and press would peel my skin off and bury me alive in salt. You only have to wear an unusual hat to be taken for a Communist; imagine what loyal John Citizen would be led to suspect if I back out!"

"But we could pay the court fines! It would be worth it, to make you happy again: you stamp about in a foul mood nowadays. Why can't we do it, Steve?"

"Are you crazy?" He slapped his pocket. "At least, we have money—which we never had before. That's why I fell for the position in the first place: the wages were beyond dreams. But if I'd known what went with 'em . . ." He grinned sourly. "Who says heroes are lucky? There are moments on field training when I wish

for shattering defeat. It'd get the worry out of my mind."

"Steve!"

A lengthy, shocked silence. Then:

"There is a cure, Steve . . . Most people—"

"No need to tell me what you mean!" Bitingly, he mimicked her voice: "Buy *RESTITE*, the Relaxer that Soothes Frayed Nerves! Forget Anxiety and the Tempo of Life! *RESTITE* banishes this-that-the-other-something-else-and-even-more!"

"Drugs! Tablets! They can go to the devil, and I hope they make him sick! We were healthy without 'em ten years ago, in the fifties, weren't we? *Now* look at it! Streets, factories, shops—everywhere bursting with row enough to wake the dinosaurs! No wonder people are always gargling with newfangled potions—they'd be nervous ruins if they didn't. But *I* won't be a zombie: I won't, and that's that! They can *keep* their drugs! They can—"

His brandished fist sent a cup spinning; tea swilled across the table, forming a hot, brown stain creeping steadily over the white cloth.

"Steve! Oh, Steve

He sank down into his chair again, almost sobbing. "I'm sorry, Judie; I didn't intend to shout like that—I—I just . . ."

The silver clock sang:

*"Time flies, Stephen Slater,
And you must not now delay;
Stay one minute later
And you'll wreck this mighty day;
Duty calls you, Slater —
So you must be on your way!"*

And a tiny record behind the dial played the National Anthem, followed by the United Western Hemisphere March. The chimes and blares filled the room.

Haggard, Steve stood up, still staring bemusedly at the overturned cup.

"I'll walk with you to the station," she said, averting her eyes from his.

"No, thanks. A final surprise I've been saving." He nodded at the window.

A car was halting at the gate.

"Police. Secret, of course. Other cars will be on either side, and snoopers with guns will be watching from various posts along the route. It's a new rule that's been enforced. Must I say why?"

She winced, paling. "Latimer . . .?"

"Yes. We're too valuable to lose. Officials have been leaving their footprints all over the walls since Johns was shot and that fanatic minced Latimer with his grenade."

A man in grey overcoat and trilby strolled into the porch. The doorbell tinkled.

"Oh, here goes nothing. By the by, Travis swears that one day they'll drive tunnels to each man's home to move him about in complete safety."

The doorbell tinkled again.

"I wonder," he said, "why they don't use the sewers?"

Then he was gone.

Travis looked round as the outer door opened. "Oh, hello, Steve."

Stephen Slater came in, shut the door, sat down and counted the men—seven, with himself. He knew where the rest would be. He glanced curiously at the blank television screen.

"You may well gape," growled Collins. "We had it on—or, rather, he did." He indicated Beverby. "Apart from stinking commercials and gushy propaganda, all he could find was a horror production or some such tripe." He snorted. "Of all the muck to watch while you're waiting."

Beverby flushed. "That was Shakespeare. Didn't you ever go to school?"

"Shakespeare or not," said Lennox, "the majority vote was that it gave us the creeps. And this is democracy." He snapped his fingers. "Macbeth went."

"What I don't understand," said Beverby to Collins, "is your ability to see through government lies and sponsored insincerity, and your inability to appreciate true art."

"And what I don't understand," countered Collins, "is why a fellow with your qualifications ever volunteered for this job."

Beverby smiled ruefully. "I sought glory. I would be famous, and the pay was incredibly high, so, like a fool, I gulped the bait. And here I am. How are the mighty fallen!"

"Collins."

Collins rose, glared at the microphone, and strode out through the inner door with an air of bravado that deceived no one. There was silence for a few seconds.

Steve remarked, "I feel rotten; I had a squabble with the wife and spilled gallons of tea all over the place. I'm a big bundle of nerves."

"Don't worry about that," said Lennox bitterly. "You'll feel

fine when they've finished with you next door."

"Yes!" added Travis. "But you'll only feel worse later. They don't seem to realize that, do they? After a few months of this sort of treatment your emotions swing in a cycle: high, low, higher, lower, right up, deep down, getting grislier all the time."

"Never mind," soothed Steve. "The sacrifice is for the grandeur of Great Britain and of the United Western Hemisphere." He laughed cynically. "Can we help it if the common herd licks our boots?"

"Lennox."

Lennox shrugged, grimaced and went through the inner door.

"He'll get into trouble, one day," declared Travis. "He'd better not say things like that in public."

Conversation died. Steve regretted this. The men could be honest and outspoken among themselves. Remarks made here were recorded, probably, but no action was ever taken against anyone. The techniques used in adjacent rooms led one to forget his own views for as long as was necessary; and, elsewhere, the risk of police spies being near was a sufficient deterrent. The men were heroes; they were in John Citizen's eye; they must be perfect examples of patriotic innocence. Only here dared they speak their minds: those in command had granted them this safety-valve.

Fletcher swallowed a blue pill.

"They'll murder you when they discover that in you," prophesied Steve morbidly.

"What do I care! They'll murder *you*, too, and you haven't done a thing."

"Thanks!"

"Beverby."

Beverby went out. The inner door closed behind him.

"Lennox has been a misanthrope," said Travis, "ever since those Hong Kong riots last year: his young brother was killed there while on his National Service. The kid would have been back home if they hadn't extended the period to thirty-six months. Makes anybody wild, that."

Fletcher swallowed another pill.

"Another point that makes you wild," grumbled Travis, "is that within a few weeks people could be trained to replace us. Science! It's driven out the human element. We're just nameless cogs that can be duplicated to order. If you—"

"Travis."

He went. The room seemed larger and colder.

Steve thought: "Was Beverby right? Did we chase mirages?"

All this worry, waiting, happiness, worry, waiting, happiness—is it a waste of time ?” But it was too late: he had volunteered.

“*Harris.*”

Unspeaking and morose, as usual, Harris went.

“This *RESTITE* . . .” ventured Steve. “Is it any good ?”

“No,” growled Fletcher, swallowing a third pill. “But it annoys the gang next door.”

“*Fletcher.*”

And Steve was alone.

It’s always like that when you come last. You sit in the silent, empty room with its blank screen, deserted chairs and waiting microphone. Your legs and hands quiver. You peer at your thumb. It twitches delicately. Has she cleaned that table cloth ? The pyramids are in Egypt. Beverby once said: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport.” Your laugh evokes odd, croaking echoes.

“*Slater.*”

Steve got up, went to the inner door, took a deep, shaky breath, and stepped through.

For the general examination, they strapped him into a glittering complexity of wires, screens, tubes and dials. Samples were drawn of his blood, urine, and of other fluids that could indicate subtlest faults in his physical condition; ultradiography cameras probed his bones, inch by inch, seeking fracture or structural weakness; his heart was stimulated to sickening activity and the efficiency of his circulation was compared with all past records; an oxygen dome was clamped over him and his lungs were tested thoroughly; sweat glands were checked and the perspiration was rapidly analysed. He felt that each glistening jelly cell in his body had, in turn, been plucked out and scrutinized, modified and rejuvenated, all at high speed.

“*One hour and eight minutes,*” announced someone.

Inwardly, he cursed.

They had only just begun.

“Keep running,” rapped the operator.

Steve bit back a rude word and pounded harder with his feet, gasping harshly. The ultimate descendant of the primitive stethoscope clung like a thirsty leech to his chest, sucking eagerly at heartbeats; peristalsis sent them pulsing down wire intestines to a distant metal stomach that digested them and belched its opinion of the menu from microphones.

Listening, the operator scowled. “Faster !” he urged.

More wires ran from Steve’s wrists, ankles and temples to

further devices. His limbs flailed, his lungs burned, and the wires flapped and wriggled as the rat-race spun smoothly.

"If only I'd known what to expect!" he thought. "'SMASH THE COMMUNISTS!' So fine, they made it sound! It's nothing but science against science!"

"You're slowing!" cried the operator.

"Fifty-seven minutes!"

"I don't want to be a hero," his mind screamed. "What do I care if morons praise me! I want life, not worship!" He remembered the speeches that had made him famous, the television interviews, apparently unrehearsed, the confident promises of victory after the coldly devastating criticisms of the Communists' weaknesses—and thought of the watching millions welcoming hollow lies from a semi-hypnotized man who was saying mechanically what the politicians had ordered him to say.

"Hold still, can't you!"

He winced as needle after needle stabbed his flesh, filling him with energy, pure, red, warm and tingling—tensing the body and lulling the brain. He tried not to gag as he swallowed sour tablets. He tried to think of the money that was his only solid consolation.

"Forty-three minutes . . ."

The psychologists did their job. Questions, questions and questions, questions and questions and questions, questions and questions and questions and questions. He strove to tidy his muddled mind and to sift rational coherence out of whirling chaos; but it was hopeless. Mentally, he was half in a trance. Exactly as planned.

"You must calm yourself," they insisted. "You are a trained tactician, the finest in the United Western Hemisphere. You know how to crush defence; how to demoralise; how to repel the strongest advance; you know what to do in any conceivable emergency. You have the Experience! You know where our Reserves of Power lie; you know how and where and when and why to draw on them. You are Loyalty! You will uphold our Honour! You are Great Britain! You are United Western Hemisphere! You symbolise Democracy! You stand for Splendid Freedom!"

Pride surged within him.

"Twenty minutes."

Colonel Johnson, medals gleaming on his immaculate uniform, fanned into fierce heat the spark lit by the psychologists:

"This will be tough, Slater: never forget that! And do not fail; do not fail. Too much is in the balance; months of field training are over: this is Crisis Day. But you will not fail. You know—you *know*

—that you are invincible, utterly, tremendously *unconquerable* ! Discipline, Co-operation, Sacrifice of Erratic Personality to be a perfect Cog on a perfect Wheel in a perfect Machine—such is Splendour ! *There* glows our Guide, *there* throbs our mighty Thunder, *there* shines our Salvation ! ”

“*Ten minutes.*”

Rest. Silence. Tranquillity and peace. They slept a contented sleep, while their bodies were pumped full of fresh vitality, while their brains were pumped full of instruction and information. Tactics. Formation attack. Fighting retreat. You are Free Speech ! Defence manoeuvres. Smash the Communists !

“*Two minutes.*”

“*Months of field training are over: this is Crisis Day!*”

They awoke. They rose. All dressed alike, mindless individually, ruled by calculated reflex, glowing with tablet health, sparkling with injected strength and vigour, and convinced that Communism would shatter in the inevitable clash.

They followed Brimmick, in step, arms swinging, oblivious to the misery that would swamp them when the drugs wore off.

Great doors rolled aside with a rumbling of steel on concrete. More doors yawned in the distance, revealing the enemy: all dressed alike, mindless individually, ruled by calculated reflex, glowing with tablet health, sparkling with injected strength and vigour, and convinced that Capitalism would shatter in the inevitable clash.

“*Fifty seconds.*”

The nations trembled in anticipation of war. Meanwhile, Prestige and Propaganda, where every little helps.

Television cameras peered from the walls of the vast, crowdless, subterranean amphitheatre. The referee stood waiting with his ball and watch and whistle. The ground shook to the blare and boom of military music, and all the world was breathless as the men marched out to glory.

JOHN ASHCROFT



Better Than We Know

*Even our most self-despised actions
can have unimaginable consequences.*

Illustrated by M. Somerville.

It was one of those bitter rows, of which we'd had too many lately. Probably the old basic frustration was still the cause, but this time it was well disguised. A woman had come between us: Lola Castros, Californian adventuress.

"A rag doll!" scoffed Joanna. "Lola Montez with acute anaemia. Amber between beds. Sugar without spice. Not wicked—only naughty. Will you never understand women?"

I had lived with Lola Castros for many months. She was real to me. I'd even given her the hot, black Spanish eyes which now mocked me.

"Will you never understand good literature?" I stormed back. "I——" But the rest of it jammed in my throat through sheer rage. I'd put my best into that novel. It was a kind of offering to her. And she'd trampled on it.

"Go on," she taunted. "Tell me the rest. I'm ignorant. I'm a cruel Spanish she-dog. Listen—if you'd put me in your book, instead of that gutted fish, you'd have a *real* bi——"

I slapped her. "Stop that sort of talk!"

Then we were both very still, staring at each other. I had never

hit her before. Probably no one had hit her before. Her eyes were still defiant but tears were gathering in them.

Then the 'phone trilled beside us.

I picked up the handset automatically. My passion was spent. I wanted to say I was sorry. Instead, I said, gruffly: "Brewster speaking."

"Hello, Bill. Tom here."

It was Tom Blood, my agent, 'phoning from 'Frisco.

"Don't tell me you've sold Lola already," I said.

"Lola?" echoed the tiny voice in metallic surprise. "Oh, you mean your new novel. Haven't had time to read the thing yet."

So Lola was a 'thing.' "Then why the devil are you ringing me?" I said, coldly enough to freeze his ear.

"Usen't you to be connected with the Rocket Society, way back?"

"Way back, yes. Why hold my childhood against me?"

"What's eating you today, Bill? Ain't the weather right? Look, have you kept up with this space travel stuff?"

"Astronautics? I read the papers. I used to edit the Society Bulletin. I still know most of the people in the game. So?"

"The kids can't get enough space travel dope these days. Rudledge just rang me. They want a 60,000-word book, non-fiction, covering the field in simple language for teen-agers. But it must be authentic—the kids know their onions. I thought of you. Like to try?"

"Ten years ago I'd have jumped at it, Tom. But I'm a big boy now. They can fly to the Moon, Jupiter, where the hell they like, so long as they leave me my patch of good old Mother Earth, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Dreiser, and wine—the worthwhile things."

"Money's worthwhile, Bill. Rudledge offer three thousand advance. They plan a big edition. Marchiori's been signed to illustrate. But if you're not sold on space travel any more——"

"I'm not. But wait." I thought for a bit. Then: "Let me talk it over with Joanna. I'll ring you back."

"Good. But make it today."

"Well?" said Joanna, distantly. Her eyes were dry again.

I told her what Blood had said, and asked: "What do you think?"

"Do the book."

"Look, Joanna, we left the big city because we couldn't take the phoneys any more. I came here to write books I believed in. Now you and Blood want me to be just another phoney."

She regarded me steadily. "You've already decided to do the book because we need the money. Why put on an act? We're no

different from the Greenwich Village crowd. We have our principles. We also have our price."

"It's not quite like that. There are another hundred and three instalments to pay on this place, and I've got to have some place to work."

"All right, then—you've talked yourself into it."

I hesitated, and knew that even my hesitation was a show. I grabbed at the 'phone angrily. After I'd told Blood I would do the book, I walked miserably out of the 'dobe cottage. The mist over the Sierras was thickening. The wheat stirred a little. A long freighter came crawling down the line towards Calzada, smearing the sky with black smoke.

And I'd come right out here to find peace of soul!

I felt pretty much of a flop on all counts.

Presently, an arm stole about my waist from behind. My first impulse was to reject it. But there were 'special reasons why Joanna could be spiteful. I had to make allowances for her moods—and mine. My hand closed gently on her arm.

"Sorry, darling," she whispered.

"It's okay, girl. . . I think it's going to rain."

Later, I collated material for the space book. Wryly, I quoted some of my old ingenuous editorials. "Listen to this, Joanna. 'Men will step from planet to planet, and at last fly out into the great sea of inter-stellar space' Boy, could I mix a good metaphor in those days!"

"The kids will love it."

"Sure. How about this? 'The research goes on. The secrets of space travel are falling one by one into Man's hands' Oh, youthful optimist! The truth is, we're stymied. With the best of chemical fuels it'd take a four-step rocket near as big as the Empire State to land a two-bit ship on the Moon. Or, using orbital technique, the number of ferry rockets needed would drain Fort Knox. As for an atomic rocket, the problem of heat transference is insoluble. A uranium reactor is only going to melt itself trying to heat the propellant to the degree required."

"Just what they told Chris Columbus, and the Wright Brothers, and . . ."

"False analogies, my clever girl," I said, but laughed. Then, seriously: "Never mind the technical blind alleys. Let's put first things first. Let's conquer ourselves before we try to conquer space. The proper study of mankind is Man. That's my real work. That's what I believe in. I'm betraying my own philosophy to spread this

junk."

Joanna sighed. "Okay, Faust, get on with it, sell your soul—and then let's forget it."

I got on with it. I wrote it in four weeks. I began with Lucian's fictional trip to the Moon and finished way out in extra-galactic space among the fictions of the astronomers.

I remember that as I was trying to convey some idea of the size of the universe, so Palomar wobbled in its faith in the Cepheid method of measuring extra-galactic distances, and kept doubling up on its estimates. I strove to keep abreast of them—it was like Alice having to run hard to remain in the same place—with a series of footnotes which became progressively more ironical about the "expanding universe."

But that was the only time the tongue in my cheek really showed.

I wrote about orbital techniques and space-stations, meteor hazards and lunar bases, the whole claptrap of it, as though they were matters as vital as birth, marriage, and death. I disinterred the now petrified enthusiasm of my youth, painted its wan cheeks red, and paraded it as though it were still living and breathing.

Never was I more sanguine than in the chapter headed "Become a Spaceman—Now !" Gravely, I pointed out that a spaceman wouldn't be a sort of cosmic cowboy, wearing a space-helmet instead of a sombrero, but an individual with brain and self-control. And he'd never be through studying. Mathematics, three-dimensional navigation, rocket engineering, atomic physics, astronomy—he'd have to have more than a grounding in them all. It was up to the younger generation. Space travel was just around the corner. Now was the time.

I finished that chapter on a note of earnest admonition: "You can't start learning too young—remember, a spaceman is soon too old."

Rudledge liked it, anyhow. They even agreed to take *Lola Castros* if I'd prune 20,000 words from it. The space travel book sold like hot cakes. The emasculated *Lola Castros* sank without a ripple.

I refused to do any more space travel books. I'd made enough out of that one to pay off the mortgage and add another fifty acres of good wheatland to my holding. But the bad taste in my mouth would never quite die away.

I tried to cleanse myself with renewed sincere attempts at the Great American Novel. In the next ten years I rode into the literary tilt-yard nine times. I was unhorsed without fail at each event, but sometimes the critics applauded the fight I'd put up. I still felt the novelist's craft was the highest possible calling. I regretted none of

these efforts to help man understand himself. What worthier cause was there ?

Yet I remember leaning forlornly against the gatepost in the evening of my forty-fifth birthday, smoking a pipe, and trying to make an assessment of my life as it passed its prime.

It ran something like this: Loving wife, one. House, one. Acres, sixty. Employees, four. Self-betrays, one. Broken bones, fifteen. Laurel crowns, none.

Were the scale-pans level ? I thought not. As I strove to gauge their juxtaposition, I noticed a cloud of dust rising far along the road and approaching steadily. It took my attention.

Strangers were events in these parts, and I could already see that it wasn't a car belonging to the district.

It slowed as it approached, and it became apparent that it contained only the driver—a man. He stopped the car level with me and leaned out. He was a young fellow, thin-cheeked and tired-looking.

"Is Mr. William Brewster's house along this way ?"

"This is it. I'm Brewster."

"Oh." He looked at me oddly for a moment. Then he asked, diffidently: "I wonder if you could spare me a few minutes ?"

I was in the rare mood to be glad to see anyone, even a salesman. It was my birthday and I hadn't had a visitor.

"Sure. Driven far ?"

"From 'Frisco. Your publishers, Rudledge, told me you lived at Calzada."

"Good lord, I'll bet you can use a drink. Come right in."

"Thanks, Mr. Brewster."

When he got out I saw he was a little chap, and thin all over; but he looked wiry.

"My name's Mappin," he offered, accompanying me to the door. It didn't mean a thing.

There were surprises awaiting both of us inside. I'd been lounging around outdoors for nearly an hour and Joanna had packed a lot into that time. The table was laid with unusual delicacies and our best china. In the centre of it stood an iced birthday cake with nine red dwarf candles burning on it in a ring (four of them larger than the others), flanked by two tall bottles of Asti Spumante. I'd anticipated none of these things.

The other surprise was nicest of all. Joanna came smiling down the old staircase wearing the beautiful dress which her great-grandmother had brought from Castille at the time of the Missions, a masterly fusion of silk and black and white lace.

Her jet-black hair was drawn up and graced by a pair of shining Spanish combs and a vivid poppy.

She was three years younger than I, but in the candlelight she seemed to undercut me by another dozen.

Mappin was obviously impressed by her appearance, and that pleased me too. I'd always been proud of Joanna.

"Joanna, this is Mr. Mappin, from San Francisco."

They shook hands, and asked each other how they did, and Mappin said: "I'm not really from 'Frisco—it just so happened I landed there."

"From sea?" I asked, and he nodded.

I opened one of the bottles—the cork hit the rafters. I poured three glasses that hissed and bubbled.

"If you don't mind," said Mappin, awkwardly, "I'd rather have coffee."

I was hurt. "But this is a celebration," I protested.

Again he looked at me oddly, and I wondered if he were holding something back.

"Of course, Mr. Brewster—I'm sorry," he said. "The fact is, I've never touched alcohol before—liquor is bad in my line. But you're right: this is a celebration. I'll be glad to drink your health."

"Thanks." We touched glasses and drank, and I looked at the candles and asked whether I was supposed to be nine or ninety. Joanna laughed, and turned to Mappin. "Just what is your line, Mr. Mappin?"

"I'm a pilot."

"Then your abstinence is understandable, even commendable—but not usual," I said.

"Air or sea?" Joanna probed.

"Neither, Mrs. Brewster," said Mappin, and looked away from her bafflement towards my bookshelves. "Pardon me," he said, and began to scan them. All booklovers act that way. They seek common ground with their host by approaching him through his book-titles. So I watched him indulgently, and liked him the more when he concentrated on the shelf of my own works. But he turned with a look of disappointment.

"I don't see your space travel book here, Mr. Brewster. I was hoping you had a spare copy, as it's out of print."

"It's out of print because it's out of date," I said. "I believe I've a couple of old copies upstairs somewhere, but it's not a book I'm proud to show."

He looked astonished. "Why not?"

"I've written better," I said, evasively. "Surely that's not all you've come to see me about?"

"More or less, Mr. Brewster. You see, I've lost my copy—the one I've had since I was a kid. It went down with my ship, to the bottom of the Pacific. There are sentimental reasons why I'd like to replace it."

"Well, that can be attended to easily enough." I went upstairs to the study and rummaged in the closet. I was mistaken. I had but one copy left. The dust was grey on it, and the wrapper torn. When I opened it, I saw the pages were becoming tinged with yellow. It smelt slightly musty.

If Mappin felt sentimental about it, I didn't. He could have my last copy. The bottom of the Pacific seemed an admirable place for the book. It was rot to begin with, and now it was becoming rotten tangibly. But I cleaned it up before I took it down and gave it to him. His eyes quite lit up at the sight of it. He looked at the opening pages, then shut the book gently.

He stood there holding it as carefully as though it were a First Folio of Shakespeare, and then said shyly: "I wonder if you would mind inscribing it to me, Mr. Brewster?"

"Not at all." I took it, and got my pen out. "Er—what's your first name, Mr. Mappin?"

"N-Ned." He stammered like a small embarrassed schoolboy. Covertly, Joanna caught my eye, and grinned. Silently, she managed to convey the caption: "*Famous author pictured with a young admirer.*"

On the title-page I wrote "For Ned Mappin, this relic," and signed it.

"How old are you, Ned?" I asked, giving it back to him.

"Twenty-three."

I nodded, absently. It was a pity. He was likeable, but I was beginning to weary of him. Like all authors, I soak up intelligent adulation whenever it's offered—rarely enough in my case. But this sort of doggy approach from the mentally retarded was not at all flattering.

"Does your girl friend read that sort of stuff?" I asked.

"I haven't got a girl friend. I hadn't the time . . ."

"You mustn't neglect your education, Ned. Have you read *Lola Castros*?"

He shook his head. I pulled the copy from the shelf and gave it to him. "You can begin learning all about women from that," I said, coarsely.



Joanna frowned her disapproval but said nothing.

"Thank you. I've always wanted to read novels, but, you know—" He broke off.

"No time?"

"No time." He went on, awkwardly: "How much do I owe you, sir?"

"Oh, forget it. Have another drink."

"No, thanks. Look, Mr. Brewster, I feel I ought to make you some sort of return." He fumbled in his jacket pocket and laid something on the table. In the dim candle glow it looked to be just a small shapeless lump, like a piece of coal. I picked it up. It was a jagged piece of porous but quite heavy stone, dark grey in colour.

"What is it, exactly?" I asked.

"It's a piece of lunar rock."

"What rock?"

"Lunar rock. I brought a few pieces back from the Moon. Sort of souvenirs. Had a lot more specimens, but they were in the ship. It's nothing to look at, but I thought you might like a bit for a paperweight."

I held the stone in my hand and looked helplessly, and possibly foolishly, at Joanna. But she gave me no aid. She stood and enjoyed it. It was a long time since we'd last encountered the lunatic fringe, and that was back in Greenwich Village.

"Well, thanks, Ned," I said, at last. "I'll treasure it. When did you get back?"

"Yesterday. I sure muffed the landing. I'm scared to go back and face 'em at HQ. When the launch brought me in, I ducked and ran. Just anywhere at first, and then I thought of you—I'd heard you lived down this way. I rang your publishers for the address. I've wanted to meet you ever since I was thirteen. If it hadn't been for you, I'd never have been the first man to reach the Moon. So I hired a car and came out. I'm glad I did."

"I'm glad you did, too," I said, falsely. "But what did I have to do with it?"

"Your book. I saved up to buy it when it first came out. I learnt it by heart. And I took your advice. Do you remember the chapter called 'Become a Spaceman—Now!'? You pointed out that there was so much for a spaceman to learn that he'd better start in young. So I started in. I was studying right to the day I took off. They picked me because I knew the most. Well, perhaps, too, because I was light and wiry—the best build for a spaceman, as you said."

I didn't know what to say to that. Joanna put in quietly: "So that's why you had no time for anything else?"

"Yes, I guess so, Mrs. Brewster."

She stared at him for some seconds. Then she said: "Well, don't start wasting it now. I've just remembered, Bill—I promised to lend that copy of *Lola* to Margaret. Sorry, Ned."

I was going to say "Who's Margaret?" but realised in time I wasn't supposed to.

Mappin gave *Lola Castros* back without any show of reluctance, but he held tightly to the other book. He tapped it, and smiled ruefully at me. "Wish I'd remembered another piece of your advice: that bit about keeping a cool head in all circumstances. When I was gliding her down to the water, I got so excited over getting back safe I clean forgot to close the water-tight covers to the vents. The ship should have floated, of course. As it was, the empty propellant tanks got waterlogged, and she sank. Gradually enough for me to scramble out with a life-belt—but nothing else. But the launch knew where I was, roughly—they'd been waiting around, and tracked the ship down with radar. I was only an hour in the water."

"You know, I haven't seen any story in the papers about a Moon

trip," I said, putting a slight malicious emphasis on the word "story."

"There will be tomorrow, I guess," said Mappin. "It's sure to get around tonight—if they lift the security blanket. I suppose they will now the thing's in the bag. But I expect you can guess why they didn't want to risk making a public flop of it."

"Oh, sure. But I still don't get it. So far as I know, no country has yet put a space-station up. Did you do the trip in one hop?"

"Yes. It was an atomic ship, you see. The propellant was liquid hydrogen."

"Is it a state secret how the hydrogen was heated by the reactor?"

"It's the closest kept secret of all time," said Mappin, solemnly. "But I can trust you, Mr. Brewster, because I *know* you through this book. It only became possible through the discovery of a new principle in atomic physics. There are such things as 'sympathetic molecules' which, in an electrical field, can be made to transmit their current state of—"

"Please, Ned, some other time," Joanna cut in firmly.

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Brewster—I guess I'm keeping you from your little party. It's sure some mouthful to explain, anyhow, and I don't understand all of it myself. I'll be getting along back now."

"Do your folks know where you are?" asked Joanna.

"Haven't any folks—not now. Reckon there's no getting away from it—I've got to go and face up to reporting how I lost my ship. Or the police will be trailing me out here soon. It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Brewster, and you, sir."

"I'll see you out, Ned," I said. "Sure you won't have something to eat first?"

"No, thanks—I'm still too excited to eat."

I went with him out to the car. He paused with one hand on the door handle and looked around. The full harvest moon was rising and adding its own gilding to the wheat. There was a faint golden glow coming from the cottage window too. Joanna, in her splendid attire, was going round the room gravely with a taper lighting the candles in the tall brass sticks, which themselves shone with reflected light. The rows of bright-covered books and the daintily spread table added to the cheerful cosiness.

Mappin looked so long and silently at it all that I felt constrained to say something, however pointless, to break the spell.

"It should be a bumper harvest. We grind our own grain and bake our own bread. I'm sure looking forward to some nice new bread."

Mappin was not a handsome fellow. He had a long nose, and at the moment he looked like a wistful weasel.

"Is this your land?" he asked.

"Sixty acres of it."

He sighed. "I envy you, Mr. Brewster. A happy marriage, a home, land Roots. You create fine books. You grow your own food. You have everything."

"Not quite everything," I said, quietly, but he didn't hear me, and went on: "It's a pity everyone can't grow their own food, but there isn't that much land. There are two thousand, seven hundred million people in the world today, and they're increasing at the rate of a million every two weeks. But you saw that problem coming—you mentioned it in your book. You said we'd have to move out to the planets if only to find more land to feed the surplus population. Well—we've made a start."

He climbed into the car and reversed it.

"Goodnight, Mr. Brewster. Thanks for the book—and happy birthday!"

"Goodnight, Ned."

He drove off slowly, as if he were savouring the beauty of the late evening. I went back into the house thoughtfully.

Joanna was waiting for me. "What did you make of him," she asked.

"A nut. But a nice nut. Not quite so dumb as he appears."

She laughed, and switched on the radio. Then she kissed me lightly on the cheek and said: "That's an absolutely perfect self-description."

"Oh, phooey. You half believed him, didn't you?"

"No," said Joanna, soberly. "I wholly believed him. Not at first, but when I'd looked right into him. That young fellow's done exactly what he said he did."

"And you really—" I began, and was drowned out by a voice from the radio as it warmed up. It was announcing the nine o'clock news. Then it went straight on to tell us dramatically that it was a day of glory for the United States . . .

Afterwards, I found myself gazing down at the silly little candles on the still uncut cake, blurred of mind and of sight.

Slowly, I stirred myself to fill two of the glasses with Spumante. The remaining empty glass, which Ned had used, was a silent reminder.

"A celebration!" I muttered. "Good lord—if only I'd known! My dear—"

We raised our glasses to him, and drank.

"He did it all alone, too," I said, presently. "A one-man ship. The guts of him!" A thought occurred to me. "Why, he must have taken my stupid book with him all the way to the Moon and back"

"No one can claim their books had a more far-reaching effect than yours," Joanna goaded gently.

"Gosh, I feel like a heel when I think how I thrust that pallid pornography on him—thanks for saving me there."

I reached for the fragment of lunar rock, and examined it fondly.

Joanna sat gazing into the shallow bowl of her champagne glass. "He was only twenty-three," she murmured. "He could have been our son."

I looked at her sharply—just as sharply as the stab of that old pain of self-reproach went through me. But she had not deliberately tried to hurt me. She was lost in her dreams.

I stuffed the stone into my pocket, got up abruptly, and wandered past the book-shelves. These were my children, the only kind, it seemed, I could produce. And they were all stillborn.

Except one—which wasn't there, which I might never see again.

I moved to the window and stood looking moodily out at the great golden moon, fingering that piece of it which was in my pocket.

And I looked at the ghostly plain of wheat. Bread. But the bread I had cast upon the waters, which had returned to me after many days, seemed more important now. For what credit could I take for nourishing this good land which nourished us? I had not fought for it. If action had been left to people of my sort, the Indians would still be hunting here.

"Pioneers, O Pioneers!"

Yet people of my sort had their uses. Maybe they didn't always originate the ideas. Maybe they didn't always believe in them. But they kept them alive by circulation, until at last the seeds took root.

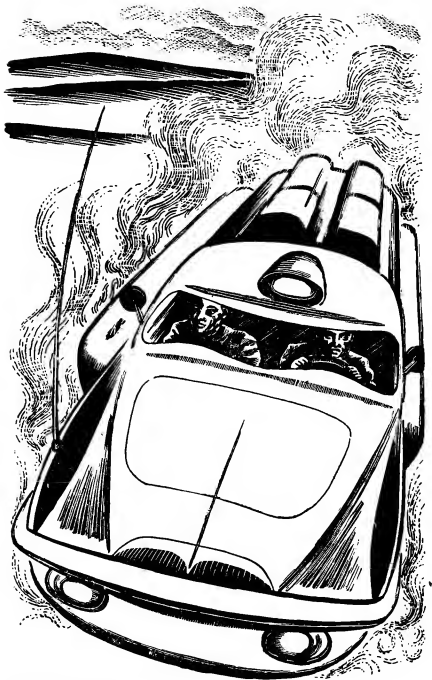
"Joanna," I said, "what was that line in Wells' *Anatomy of Frustration* you read out to me one day last week—something about a pattern?"

I had to repeat my question.

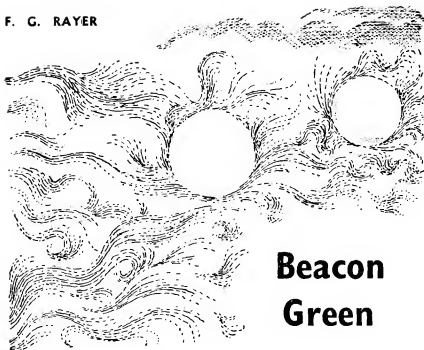
"We make a pattern better than we know. Keep on with it," said Joanna, quietly.

"Better than we know—that's right," I said.

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE



Harry Turner - 56



Beacon Green

*Man's lust for power was to bring destruction
to his enemies as well as to himself.*

Illustrated by Harry Turner.

Fleecy dabs of cotton-wool grew into vaporous cloud as the stratocraft dropped from its 78,000 ft. lane towards the Sussex Downs. Rick Deeping turned his gaze below through the transparent nacelle. France was dim behind under morning mist, and London just visible as a muddy smudge far ahead. His eyes sought objects nearer beneath the murmuring plane. Here, within a scant fifty miles of each other, were the two greatest projects ever attempted during the long, varied history of mankind. And he was intimately connected with both.

"Twenty thousand and still descending on course," the Captain stated.

Rick's strong, humorous lips twitched. "We're nicely on schedule. Take your own time, Captain."

The craft swept into tenuous vapour which obscured earth and sky. The jets were a murmuring whine, muted after the long upward

drive from Rome, little more than an hour behind. Rick thought of what he had seen. Yes, both projects were fast turning from hopeful dreams to urgent necessities. Populations were too large, Earth and her natural power resources too small . . .

"You expect a double success—or a twin failure?" Ross asked unexpectedly.

Rick let the question pass. Five years' work on the *Solar Royal* site had taught him the danger of prediction. Captain Bob Ross knew that as well as he and left the subject.

"Soon be under cloud ceiling," he said.

Suddenly the thinning haze was gone. The river Arun was a thread through the flat-tinted downs. On its west bank a vast mass of rectangular buildings jutted square and huge at the pivot of a ten mile circle of cleared countryside spoked by concrete roads. From the enormous buildings mighty power cables followed two lines of high electric pylons. One line branched away to London and the north. The second terminated at Hastings, where giant inductors beamed power to Boulogne.

The plane dropped, touched concrete, and taxied to the end of the wide runway. Rick threw up the nacelle roof.

"That's all for now, Bob. Be seeing you."

He strode towards the office buildings. Seen from ground level the Eglington Plant was even more huge. Its nearest side was twelve storeys high and a full half mile long, dwarfing the offices. The whole had a deceptive appearance of drowsiness. He limped almost imperceptibly, but the injury of two years before had not stooped his strong shoulders, or destroyed the humour at his lips. At twenty-eight Rick Deeping was tough as any man. Nor had he gained his position at the *Solar Royal* site through favouritism. Earth's first interstellar ship was too important to place in the hands of incompetents.

Inside, the reception clerk recognised him. "Commander Prestigan and Miss Simon are waiting for you, sir."

"Good."

Rick passed through the inner door and along a ringing corridor. Disdaining the lift he surmounted the stairs two at a time and emerged on the third level of the office block. A further corridor; an outer office; then the inner door opened to his touch and a man of fifty, grey haired and upright, of medium height and military bearing, was rising to greet him.

"I hoped you'd be early, Deeping." His voice had the quiet confidence of twenty years of authority. "Our schedule's been brought forward six hours."

Rick saluted. "To mid-day tomorrow!"

"Exactly."

"That's zero hour for the first trial of the *Solar Royal*."

"I know." Prestigan sounded apologetic. "Top authority gave the order, but no reason. I gathered some high brass would be this way and not want to wait. We had no real excuse for delay."

None, Rick thought. But it was galling that the initiation of the Eglington nuclear-electric pile should coincide with the first free-flight test of the *Solar Royal*. He had hoped to have first-hand experience of both, but now would be compelled to partake in the ship trial alone. His dark eyes clouded.

"I'll be sorry to miss it. Expecting difficulties?"

The commander shook his grey head, resumed his seat, and pyramided his hands. "Everything's taped, far as we know. Naturally no one can be *sure*. This is the first time a direct fission-electric plant has been operated. Getting current directly from nuclear destruction should be about five million times more efficient than the old heat-exchanger systems of the 1960's. Beyond that we can't go, except to say it's sound in theory and works small-scale."

"And is needed," Rick put in. Earth was an industrial muddle. Coal and oil were long since impracticable and antiquated sources of power. For a time the old style of atomic power stations had seemed promising. But they had brought their own problems. Thousands dotted Europe, and disposal of their by-products had become almost impossible. The Eglington Plant should replace them all, and have no by-products. It would yield electricity alone, direct from the atom. No heat-exchangers driving generators, no continuous outpouring from the secondary coolers of millions of gallons of contaminated water; no shedding of poisons into the winds of the world . . .

"You look disappointed," a voice said.

He shifted his gaze to the opened door of the second room and smiled. Reni Simon was a sight to make any man smile, he decided. Gold hair in long, smooth curls framed her smooth features. Her eyes were cool grey, direct with the courage of self-reliant twenty-four. Yet they could snap in temper—had, to his knowledge. Prestigan had once claimed that it was her efficiency which had gained him his latest promotion.

"Just sad that I can't be on the *Solar Royal* and here at the same time," he said.

"That's scheduled for noon tomorrow? Can't you delay it?"

"No more than you can delay here, when orders from above say otherwise."

She grimaced slightly, closing the door with easy grace. "If you can't be here you'd like a look round at least?"

"I would."

It was two months since he had been inside the plant. In the last two months of a project things—changed. Further, he hoped that Reni might still be interested enough in things outside the plant to occupy the place he had faithfully conserved for her on the *Solar Royal*. As they went out he smiled.

"Bugs in the pile still?"

"No." Her laugh tinkled. "Only butterflies in the commander's stomach. This project is military. That's not surprising, remembering its possibilities and cost. If anything goes wrong bang goes Commander Prestigan's stripes too, and the career that's his life, as well."

A two-level connecting wing took them to the main building. Its centre was a single chamber, the roof many floors above and supported on intricate girders. Below, the chamber sank two hundred feet into the earth, and from the balcony rail Rick surveyed the great unit occupying its centre. Never before had a direct fission-electric plant been made, eliminating intermediate, power-wasting stages.

The pile's inner workings were concealed behind the cadmium lead outer sheathing, through which ponderous cables in ridged insulators appeared. From here could flow current for all England and half Europe.

"What's new?" he asked, wondering how to mention the vacant berth.

"The protective reactor controls below."

She descended metal steps lightly. He looked down on her bobbing curls, following. "Tomorrow will be the first time a full-sized spaceship has left Earth," he said. "And the first time we've tried the continuum shift in flight."

He saw the interest in her eyes as they crossed the vacant floor space and knew his guess was right so far.

"She'll fly?"

He laughed. "Without doubt! Eglington isn't the only place where techniques improve. We plan to circle Earth, then set her down for checking. But we could as easily make a round trip to any star within twenty light years." He nodded. "Yes, we're that sure. The ship goes up with its full complement, crew, stores—the whole lot. We'll make history."

Reni Simon entered a corridor near the foot of the pile control rooms. "A fine thought."

The admiration was in her voice, too, and Rick smiled. "You

could come as well !"

She halted, looking back, abruptly frozen as if by some trick of the fluorescent lighting. "Me !"

"I've fixed a place—been wangling it for months !"

Her lips parted. "I'd love too ! But Commander Prestigan would have a fit——"

He shook his head. "Your work here will be finished an hour before the initiation of nuclear-electric fission. You'll only be an onlooker."

Rick knew he had gained his point. She would come. Her woman's curiosity would make her. If Prestigan looked like blowing up she would slip away, knowing it did not matter. Her work was done, as was Prestigan's.

He admired the controls. Everything that human ingenuity could devise had been done to make the plant safe. Tests had been conducted to a superfluous degree. The plant would work, flooding Europe with fission current.

Time fled and at last he halted. "There are other things we should both be doing. Remember I'll pick you up when I leave for the *Solar Royal*."

They parted, she to return to Prestigan's office; he to catch up with duties undone. He glanced again into the huge central chamber before leaving. The silence was uncanny—the *silence*. It was because the workmen were gone, he realised. Two months before they had swarmed everywhere. Now, instead, was a feeling of *waiting*. The pile was like a living thing that rested, awaiting the touch that would stir it to life. Awaiting noon on the morrow.

When engineers passed the tension was clear on their faces. Rick sensed it in the air, all the stronger because suppressed under a superficial pretence that all was just as usual.

He delivered his reports. Rome, mouthpiece of Europe, was interested in both the *Solar Royal* and the Eglington Plant. To him the whole affair was infinitely boring with the boredom peculiar to politics. Ship and plant were the things that mattered; their political significance was mere dry-as-dust addenda. It was late when he turned in to sleep.

He awoke to repeated tapping on the door and saw it was already light. Rising, he looked into the passage. A short, slight man, untidily dressed, was waiting uneasily. Some of the anxiety went from his thin face.

"Saints, but I thought ye'd never wake, Mr. Deeping !"

Rick drew the zip to his chin. At least half Irish, his caller was

almost hopping from one foot to the other.

"Me name's Jack Simkin. I've seen Commander Prestigan but he kicked me out." Memory clouded the light blue eyes. "He wouldn't listen !"

"To what ?"

"To what I tells 'im ! They mustn't switch on this plant——"

Rick would have laughed except for the intense determination of the little Irishman. Instead, he held the door wide, frowning.

"Come in here and tell me."

Simkin edged through. "I has hunches. Me grandmother knew fairy folk." His gaze flickered through the window to the huge building. "They mustn't use it ! If they do——"

He ended expressively and Rick felt unease and irritation. "You've proof something's wrong ?"

"Proof ? Saints no ! It's all here." Simkin tapped his forehead.

It was twenty minutes before Rick could make him leave, explaining for the seventh time that no one in his senses could have the great plant delayed without some sound reason.

"An' ain't me reasons sound enough ?" Jack Simkin declared as he was almost forced out of the door. "Don't I have hunches, and don't I *know*——"

The words and intense expression remained in Rick's mind. They remained as the hours wore on and he picked up Reni Simon and turned the big staff car west on to the main Winchester road.

For most of the drive she was unusually silent, and he wondered whether Prestigan had mentioned Simkin and his hunch.

From a mile away the gleaming *Solar Royal* stood like a beckoning church spire. A junction led through trees; beyond was the vast rocket site, with its buildings away to one side and the ship centred upon its quarter-mile disc of asbestos concrete. Articulated lorries waited at its base, and a cage crawled with apparent slowness up to the open port.

"She's splendid !" Reni Simon said, eyes shining.

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "I've a lot to check, and want to see Bob Ross, too. I'll see you up top half an hour before zero."

He jerked a thumb at the silvery lance that was the *Solar Royal*, and left her. Everything was treble-checked, as at Eglington. But there were always last-minute details, final points to discuss with Steve Wallsend, who would handle her, and final engineers' reports to pass. The interval to zero hour would not be idle.

The sealed ship murmured quietly with unleashed power, waiting on the inevitable movement of the control-room bulkhead clock. Steve

Wallsend already occupied a bucket seat. There would be no bone-crushing, violent release of energy, no skyrocket trajectory into space. Instead, the *Solar Royal* would lift smoothly on critically controlled jets, gentle as the elevators threading the skyscrapers of New London. She would circle Earth unhurriedly.

"Nearly time," Rick said. He thought of Prestigan, back at the Eglington Plant. Tension would be mounting there. Even the high brass would be watching the clocks.

Wallsend nodded. In his thirties, strongly built, he had an air of observant repose. "Never felt so confident of success in my life."

The lorries were rolling away to the distant buildings. Reni Simon was with observers, technicians and other personnel in the passengers' berths mid-way down the ship. Below was the full complement of stores. The ship might have been prepared for interstellar flight.

The radio man looked up from his panel. "Ground control reports all clear, sir."

Warning bells chimed the length of the ship. The red second hand crossed noon zero. Simultaneously, an even, unhurried murmur arose and the *Solar Royal* lifted like a feather, acceleration barely moving the seat springs into compression. The site dropped away, a diminishing disc; the view opened east and west in the sunshine, the strip of the Channel creeping into sight.

Rick opened his lips to speak, but his tongue clove into silence. Miles away to the east a green beacon, violent and awesomely huge, blossomed into being. From its core a green ball of flaming energy leapt heavenwards into the curling cirrus cloud blanketing the eastern sky. Over many miles green sparks bright as the sun shuttled from sky to earth, subsiding into flickering lightening as the centre pillar of energy subsided.

"The Eglington Plant!" Wallsend's tense face blanched.

His hands flickered over the controls and the ship's acceleration ceased. Rising steadily, she curved east. The downs showed clearly below, and the thin line of the Arun. The Eglington Plant stood intact except for its roof, which had collapsed into a sinter-filled crater. Far as the eye could see the great pylons were twisted wrecks, blued and smoking.

"Ground control has ceased transmitting," the radio man said in murmuring silence.

Wallsend glanced at him sharply. "Receiver in order?"

"Yes, sir." An odd note underlay the words.

"Keep trying."

Rick judged their altitude to be perhaps six miles. Most of the rocket thrust was combating gravity, and the downs drifted slowly along beneath. Nearer, he saw that the damage to the Eglington main building was extensive, and had all the appearance of a gigantic electrical flash-over. The discharge he had seen could have been electric—yet had been of odd colour.

A seat grated on its pivot. The radio man, his face like dirty white chalk, stared at them.

"I can't pick up any station . . ."

Steve Wallsend swore. Rick got up and gripped the operator's seat back. "Your receiver——"

"*It's all right!*" The man twisted controls. A loud background of atmospheric static filled the cabin. He twirled the dials. There was static, nothing more. He pointed shakily at meter dials standing at normal. "No transmitter on Earth is working."

Rick's throat tightened. "That's impossible!"

"Saints, but likely enough!" a voice put in. "Ain't I been telling ye?"

Untidy, thin face intense, Simkin stood in the doorway, hands each side gripping the metal.

"Didn't I warn Prestigan?" he demanded. "Didn't I tell ye all?"

"Stowaway!" Astonishment jerked the word from Rick.

"What if I am? Think I was going to stay down *there*?" Simkin pointed earthwards. "Didn't I know what was due to happen?"

His voice rose. Steve Wallsend scarcely turned in his seat. "Get him out of here!" he snapped over a shoulder.

Protesting, Jack Simkin was pushed out, and the door closed. Rick wondered if there was an element of truth in the untidy Irishman's wild statement.

"If we keep low we may see a little of what's happened," he suggested.

That a grave disaster had arisen at the Eglington Plant was apparent to the unaided eye. Rick studied the scene with binoculars. The damage was confined to the pile building and power lines. The latter puzzled him. No ordinary electrical current could possibly have caused such destruction, however high its potential. Nor had its flow been halted by any of the insulators.

The plant slid behind and the wide main roads to the north came into view. Rick gave an exclamation. Traffic should have been flowing along the great highways. Instead, every vehicle was stationary. Groups of people talked on the road. At a junction four men, tiny dots, were pushing a sedan to the side, but no vehicle moved on to pass.

"Very—odd," Wallsend said almost inaudibly.

The tall buildings of New London drew into sight. Their neon signs were dead, every window dark. In all the crowded streets no vehicle moved. Along the riverside the dock electric train system was inert as an abandoned toy.

The *Solar Royal* began to gain altitude and speed and he saw that Wallsend was taking her away and up. Wallsend caught his eye.

"We're scheduled to circle Earth—and that's what we'll do!"

The distant landborder of Europe began to dawn out of the haze half to starboard. Rick descended the stairwell and found Reni Simon looking from one of the viewports with a group including Simkin. She greeted Rick.

"Why have all the vehicles stopped?"

Rick moved to her side. The great cities of Europe would soon pass below. "I can't pretend to know why," he said.

Simkin nodded his untidy head sagely. "Saints, and they ain't all that's stopped!" he stated. "Have you seen a light since then? And how about them city signs?"

A brilliant gleam was in his light blue eyes. Examining him, Rick wondered at the extent of his knowledge. Sincerity, at least, was clear in his voice. True or false, Simkin *believed* what he said.

"And what else has stopped?" Rick asked.

He felt tension. Simkin's gaze strayed below, then back to him. Tears stood in the light blue eyes.

"Everything, mister," he said. "Everything using electricity. That electricity from the pile was *wrong*——"

He halted, lost for words. Reni gave an exclamation. "It's impossible!"

"It's 'appened!" Simkin shook his head sadly. "I had a feeling electricity from the pile would run through everything—insulating things, too—and that no other current would ever pass again."

Rick saw that the other had no terms with which to explain what he believed. Yet proof of something odd lay below in the halted vehicles and unlit cities.

Swift, murmuring on her course, the ship sped on. France was still as if every vehicle had been frozen into immobility by magic. Paris was dark. Time passed and the Black Sea and Caspian Sea slid away behind. Darkness came, star-flecked above, uninterrupted below. Only once did Rick see a spark of light. His glasses showed a bonfire blazing on a hill slope. The great cities of the East were dark. Gripped beyond thought of passing time or fatigue, he watched Tokyo slip behind in gloom. Dawn came, showing a stilled North America. They came

low over Chicago and New York. Vehicles remained where they had halted. Folk hurried on foot, some pausing to look upwards. The great airport on Long Island was dotted with still planes.

Stiff, Rick moved from the port. Other faces were white; eyes avoided his. Reni Simon followed him.

"Is it possible, Rick?"

He looked at her. "You've an explanation?"

"No. But was there something *wrong* about the nuclear-electric current, as Simkin said? Something that would jerk atoms into isolation? That could circle the planet and make electrical equipment fail?"

He did not answer. How could cities—humanity itself—survive, with a civilisation based on vehicles, communications, processes and equipment which no longer functions? Gone centuries before were the windmills, steam trains, horses; gone, too, was the simple way of life, which could continue with those things. Men depended on a complex system of artifacts, nine-tenths of which relied, in some part, upon electrical equipment. The whole tied up into a situation of extreme gravity, Rick thought as he returned to the control room.

Steve Wallsend was tired-eyed. Rick guessed he had not left his position since the previous noon.

"Investigation of what's happened must wait," Wallsend said. "The urgent question is—what do *we* do?"

Rick guessed what he meant. The *Solar Royal* had broken contact with Earth bare moments before the surge from the fission-electric plant had stilled the planet.

"As I see it, the effect might have been instantaneous only," he said. "If so, it presumably damaged any and all electrical equipment. Or it may have left some lasting effect still able to immobilise the electrical currents by which we work."

There was silence, then the radio man got up from his chair. He, too, had not rested. "Suppose we dropped one of our parachute radio marker beacons?" he suggested.

Wallsend's gaze turned to him, comprehending. "Do that!"

The man left for the stairwell. The beacons could be dropped to give fixed reference points—had been prepared to help map a strange planet over four light years away.

The radio man returned, nodding. "It's being done."

He settled down before his panel, tuning to the marker frequency. A creamy parachute blossomed below, floating with its gleaming, swinging box. Simultaneously, an audio tone came on the receiver.

"That's it!" the radioman said flatly.

Rick watched with the binoculars as the white disc receded. The tone wailed on and on. Far below were green slopes. Simkin's homeland. Breaths were held. The note wailed on and on—and ceased. Rick saw the parachute collapse upon the hillside.

"It could be—damaged in falling?" he asked, dry lipped.

"Impossible! They're made to drop—can strike solid rock unharmed!"

The silence seemed oddly complete now the audio tone was gone. Rick wondered what damnable electrical rot had swept over the planet. If the *Solar Royal* touched down her radar, and the thousand electrical devices upon which she depended, would be stilled, perhaps for ever.

"Heaven help the folk down there," Wallsend whispered. "The cities will be—hell."

"Saints, an' there's only one thing we can do!" a voice said from the door.

They looked at the stowaway. Simkin seemed taller, straighter. His light blue eyes were very direct, almost penetrating.

"We must go to Beta I, far though it be!"

Wallsend drew in his breath with a hiss. "This time I think I agree with him——"

Strangely silent, Europe slipped into its second night of unrelieved gloom. Great cities were still, seaports noiseless except for the rise and fall of the age-old tides. No vehicles sped along the wide highways. Airports stood deserted. Most planes had landed safely. As their wheels touched earth, their electrical equipment died, mysteriously yet finally. Denied ground-control aids, other craft were less fortunate. At the main Berlin airport a stratocruiser from Iran, with eighty aboard, missed the runway and ploughed through ranks of grounded craft, stranded passengers, and two hangars. Hundreds died in the pyre light of her burning.

Darkness swept westward. Great ocean liners wallowed, their electrical equipment not responding to the efforts of their sweating crews. Over all the Earth civilisation faltered, its pivot withdrawn. In many cities panic came quickly, as power failed. In rural areas the panic was slower, spreading most often from some dark, dying city. With the second dawn came crowds on foot, fleeing cities where dwindling foodstuffs had leapt to a hundred-fold their usual price. Civilisation shuddered upon the edge of a new dark age.

Everywhere on the planet electrical technologists struggled helplessly with unresponsive instruments. The equipoise which had distinguished conductors from insulators was gone, shaken for ever

from its delicate equilibrium by the shock wave that had radiated from England. Agitated into electrical isolation, no atom would conduct

In the shadow of the silent Eglinton Plant engineers calculated what had happened, and saw its inevitability. They knew now—too late.

The Earth dwindled behind to the thrust of the *Solar Royal's* jets and Rick wondered if he would ever see her again. A mere full-scale test had suddenly been changed into the real thing. Better to go on, than risk returning, even when the step was so vast.

The shudder of the continuum shift came soon, and the stars blacked out. This was it, he thought—the test that meant failure or success.

Ship, method, and motive had arisen together. Tiny robot craft had reached Luna, then Sol's planets, and returned with data disappointing yet expected. None would support life. Some had intolerable gravity, giants frigid and remote from the sun. At the system's centre, Mercury frizzled. Even Mars and Venus were impossible, one with atmosphere so thin a man would die in hours, and the other scalded under acid, toxic vapours. Simultaneous with the disappointment had come the discovery of a planet circling Alpha Centauri, over four light years away. Spectrum tests were favourable, if uncertain. Named Beta I, the Planet seemed unattainable until an unknown engineer, working in secret, announced the result of over ten years of labour. For six months rivals tried to show the Fitzgerald continuum shift drive was impossible—and failed. Within the year the *Solar Royal* was begun. Fitzgerald, an old man, had died, but the ship lived on. Rick had seen him once, infirm and white-haired as an aged saint.

After the shift the darkness and silence was akin to eternity itself, muting even the ship's engines. But gone, too, were the limitations of space imposing a laboured journey of years. Within hours the shudder arose again, and Rick saw Alpha Centauri blaze into life and stars flick on in unfamiliar constellations.

Astrogation sought Beta I and found her. The *Solar Royal* circled, examining her surface prior to selecting a site and testing the atmosphere. Rick was awakened from sleep by the ship's communicator system. They were going down. He rose quickly from his bunk.

Seen by the naked eye, Beta I was not promising. Dry, devoid of sea or rivers, she had the appearance of great age. Millions of centuries had eroded her mountains to conformity with the flatlands below. Reni Simon was coming along the shoulder-wide corridor, and pursed her lips.

"Seems a little grim, Rick!"

He nodded. "We must be glad it's no worse. Time will show."

Exactly what, he did not care to guess. A gentle thrust began as the ship sank upon her braking jets. They were far from home, he thought. Damned far!

Motion ceased and the engines drifted into silence. Alpha Centauri flooded golden sunlight across them. Machinery began to hum—the lift, the lock mechanism.

"Let's go," Reni said.

Rick stood in the shadow of the *Solar Royal*, which pointed far away across the sandy flats. Secure on her wide stern fins, she had touched down with a smoothness which might have been the result of scores of trial landings.

Wind sighed round her, carrying brown, dusty sand. Always this dust, Rick thought with distaste. It only settled when the dry wind ceased, leaving a film of particles over every item of equipment. Ash of a dead world—not that Beta I was wholly dead, he reminded himself. Rather was she shrivelled, drained of moisture by ten thousand years of drought. In the week since landing they had found no water, no vegetation, and no life bigger than the tiny, scaled lice that ran in the sand.

A murmur grew far away on the rim of the flats and the half-track that had lain in the ship's hold mounted an undulant ridge into view. A grunt came from behind Rick.

"Saints, an' we're sunk if they've struck a blank again."

"Not necessarily. We could make another series of explorations, to a greater radius."

"An' probably find things as bad!"

Rick felt inclined to agree. A fifty-mile radius should give a fair sample of conditions. Dust had obscured much of the planet's surface when they approached. He had chosen the sandstone flats because it was thinner there, and did not fancy taking the *Solar Royal* up on unnecessary hops.

Simkin went out towards the slowing truck, and he followed. Steve Wallsend pushed off his goggles, wiped dust from his face, and left the driver's seat.

"Infernal sand!" he said. "I'd give something for the green hills of Earth!"

He squinted heavenwards at the sky, faintly brown from high floating dust. Rick pretended not to hear the sadness in the voice.

"Struck blank again?"

Wallsend slapped his trousers and dust flew. "I'm not sure.

There's a depression which *might* be an old watercourse, with caves beyond. We turned back because we'd made a circular trip and fuel was short."

Rick felt there was excitement behind the guarded words. Yet it would be best to wait until dawn the next morning. Night often brought strong winds which swept dust thickly across the flats.

"We were too far away to see much," Wallsend said, as if cautioning against optimism, and went into the sectional hut they had set up as H.Q.

The ship's radio operator descended from the open port. Each man had his duties, and Rick knew the operator had maintained search and watch for any signal showing intelligent life existed in the Alpha Centauri system. When men came so far from home they must be ready for anything.

"There's something I'd like you to hear," the man said.

There were lines about his lips and his eyes were uneasy. Rick looked at him sharply, nodding.

"We'll go up!"

The ascent cage rose to the port, giving a wide uninterrupted view of dusty brown earth, powdery as sand, untouched by rain for millennia. Beta I was *old*, Rick thought, as he licked his lips and tasted the dry, gritty flavour of the dust.

In the control room the radioman tuned his equipment to a short waveband and a fizzling chatter burred through the speaker. Wavering, rapid as a record played at tenfold speed, something about it set Rick's nerves on edge.

"You haven't heard it before?" His voice was hard.

The other silenced the quickfire bedlam of sound. "Not until I came out." He hesitated. "It's local—the strength shows that."

Rick sucked in his lower lip. This was about the last thing he had expected. "How close?"

"Can't say yet. Probably within a thousand mile radius."

"You've taken directive bearings?"

"Yes, sir. The source is east, and not stationary."

Rick gazed across the plain to where Alpha Centauri was setting, red behind the floating dust. So far Beta I was unknown. They had explored but a tiny area on her vast surface.

"Let us know if anything develops," he said.

He descended to the hut and told Wallsend. Bob Ross and the others were reviewing the map which represented the extent of exploration. It was unsatisfactory enough, a bare area of insignificant natural features.

"Pity the ship couldn't carry a helicopter," Ross decided.

The shadows were growing, the sky reddened with evening. Outside, Rick found Reni Simon with a phial containing sand lice. She smiled at his glance.

"Nothing else to examine—yet."

He looked at them. Large as a finger-nail, silvery, they searched rapidly for escape.

"We'll be away early at dawn," he promised.

The half-track halted on the top of the dusty hill. The night wind had gone, leaving the clearest hour of the day, and Rick stood up in the back of the truck, scanning the panorama below through binoculars.

Far in the distance a shallow depression ran parallel with the horizon, as if a giant finger had drawn a straight line in the sand. The long, slow fall of the hills terminated at it. Beyond, sandstone hills rose quickly, the sharpest slope he had yet seen. Many apertures dotted the face of the hill flanking the depression.

"Caves, or I'm a Dutchman!" Steve Wallsend said from the driver's seat.

A thin skein of smoke drifted from the mouth of one and Rick felt excitement. Here was intelligent life, even if primitive. Beta I was not mere rock and dust, empty

They rolled down the slope, dust following in billows and the purr of the engine echoing from the elevation behind. A short figure of less than human height had come from a cave, and was watching them. He appeared sage, kindly, immeasurably placid with age-old wisdom, and wore only a simple garment belted at the waist. He could have been a desert dweller of Earth, Rick thought.

On a barren, rocky pinnacle near the planet's axis blue light flickered intermittently. Quiescent in its glow, the alien being let its circle of awareness drift out over the lifeless deserts surrounding the point where it had landed. Here was a planet that would at least give temporary repose, the alien thought. Later, a moister, less barren world must be sought. Satisfied, the alien attuned its mind to the equipment it had set up on the rocky peak. The blue light flickered more strongly, radiating information away into the vastness of space. Beyond Alpha Centauri, equipment attuned to its burbling oscillation responded. A shoal of ovoid craft changed course, bows set for the planet many millions of miles away.

The alien let its consciousness drift on, scanning increasing areas of the planet it had found, and its level of awareness suddenly



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increased. Far away, dim, inarticulate as the minds of lowly creatures in worlds it had left, was a pool of thought strange to it. It directed its intelligence fully in that direction; simultaneously the flickering glow from the equipment on the rocky outcrop grew in frequency and complexity of waveform.

"So Beta is just about what we expected," Rick said. "Old. Populated when Earth was steaming jungle. Dead, now—almost——"

His gaze returned to the figure who had waited without fear while the truck rumbled into the shallow valley bottom. The placid blue eyes met his unwaveringly. The face was weathered, more oval than a man's, the hair white. He would hesitate to guess at the Betian's age, he decided. The simple vestment of woven plant fibres left the arms exposed. They were lean, well-muscled, devoid of any of the fragility of age. Yet the eyes were those of a philosopher.

"I am surprised still," Rick said.

"Because I accept your coming so easily? Or because I speak your tongue?" The other smiled, half wistful. "It is so?"

"A little of both."

"It shall be explained, as I have said. We in the caves saw the fire of your ship burn through the sky and knew it had come." A browned hand took in the half-track. "Yesterday I saw your vehicle upon the hill and awaited you."

Rick felt at a loss. "For the present all is strange, like your name, Dalit Yo."

"Time will bring understanding."

Dalit Yo disappeared into the cave and Rick looked his unspoken question at the others. It was a mere hour since they had halted the truck, yet already the Betian treated them as deserving no particular curiosity or astonishment. Furthermore, he had replied instantly to their first hesitant question, as if accustomed to their language.

"A cool customer," Bob Ross said quietly.

The other caves were silent. Only from Dalit Yo's did a thin line of smoke drift, rising slowly from a tiny heap of brittle thorny twigs. Beta I was just about finished, Rick thought. Her peopled youth was gone. Who could guess how many thousand years of slow decline had passed?

Reni Simon sat on the step of the half-track, eyes pensive. "If wisdom could have saved them, they'd be prospering still," she murmured.

Dalit Yo came from the cave, and Rick saw what she meant. The lined face had the placidity of complete understanding and knowledge. Earthmen were mere children of a race in its infancy.

"I will show you something you might not find," he said, his voice whispery as the dry hills upon which he lived.

They climbed into the truck and rolled away. Dalit Yo spoke little, directing them with movements of a lean arm. The dry watercourse grew deeper, then ceased. Hills came, then lower ground where tiny thorny bushes scarcely larger than a man's hand held reluctant tenure in the rocky dust. Another watercourse appeared, descending slowly between hills.

"I have not been so far for many years," Dalit Yo said sadly.

The descent continued, and patches of a dry herb appeared, spines occasionally decked with tiny white flowers. Abruptly the hills ceased and in a basin before them arose a city of slender towers, wide streets and creamy buildings, silent and deserted.

"Zirreh," Dalit Yo said. "*Town on the Spring*. It was the last."

The truck's motor echoed from the walls. The edges of the city were lost in the creeping dust of the hills, buildings and tall towers slowly receding into the sandy brown until even their tops were lost. Moisture stood in the old native's eyes.

"You see but a third. Zirreh was mighty—"

They walked round the buildings in the centre of the basin, where the dust was scarcely ankle deep. Rick felt the absolute dearth of green and moisture overpowering him, shrivelling his very spirit. He caught Simkin's eye and Simkin wiped his brow.

"Saints, but I'd give ten years of me life for a green field!"

Dalit Yo nodded, leading them into a building topped by four pinnacles. "When water goes—death comes—"

They walked through echoing corridors decorated with designs of strange beauty, colours glowing in the dimness. A circular chamber opened out, large and domed. At its centre was a walled hole.

"The source of the spring," Dalit Yo stated. "There is water for some months each year."

Some months of the year, Rick thought. Yet even that was infinitely precious. Mere weight had limited the *Solar Royal's* cargo and the same problem had been in all their minds.

He looked into the well. It descended out of the reach of the light coming through the curved windows. Any pumping equipment which might once have supplied the city was at a lower level or removed.

"This is the deepest point of the spring," Dalit Yo said as if guessing his thought. "The pumps were elsewhere. But there is a chain, a hundred times longer than you can span, and a vessel which was lowered at the time of celebration of the rains."

He showed them. The chain was of hard metal, yet worn to almost hair flimsiness where the sides of the links had rubbed the shaft. Clearly it had been the only means of drawing water for a long time.

They left at last, sobered. Rick tried to imagine what scenes had taken place in the city. Zirreh, Town on the Spring. A fitting name—and one showing what water had meant.

Outside, he rubbed a gauntlet against carved masonry, trying to guess its age. The stone collapsed with a whisper of particles, bringing down a little heap of rubble. He saw the others watching, saw, too, their expressions. As Dalit Yo had said, the city was old.

"Where's Bob?" Steve Wallsend asked as they climbed into the truck.

Rick halted. He had not noticed, or seen where Bob Ross had gone. They shouted. Their voices echoed loudly, but brought no reply. Rick's surprise became unease. He went back quickly into the chamber, but it was empty.

"Our footprints may help," Wallsend said behind him.

They circled carefully, studying the dust. They had not separated much, and only at one point did footsteps lead away from the centre of the chamber.

"I didn't go that way," Simkin offered.

"Nor I." Wallsend shook his head.

Rick followed the steps. They led to an arch, as if Bob Ross had gone to look out. Two paces beyond the arch they ceased. From that point a smooth indentation, made as if by a giant rolling ball, led away straight as a line in the ankle deep dust. Looking at the mark, Rick felt chilled. It was so unexpected, so odd.

"I have never seen such a mark," Dalit Yo said at his elbow. His lips were twitching, and his pale blue eyes turned down upon the sandy brown.

Four days passed. Dalit Yo had barely a score of companions, but Rick admired their quiet wisdom, comparing their arts with the futile productivity of Earth. Their age could not be guessed, but several appeared much younger than the old leader. All were upright, strong, noble. No racial weakness was causing their disappearance from the planet, but lack of life-giving water.

Bob Ross was not found. They had followed the indentation for some hours, then lost all trace of it on a rocky plateau many miles in extent. Away beyond lay a wilderness which might reach fully to the polar regions, for all Rick knew, and he decided further search was for the time impossible. They talked long after the distant sun had set, that night. Ross's disappearance was baffling, its cause one confounding speculation.

On the fifth evening Rick stayed at the caves. The thought of remaining permanently on Beta was appalling if conditions so far encountered were representative. Yet no radio signals had followed them from Earth and that fact was conclusive. If the *Solar Royal* touched down there, she might never rise again. Without refuelling, the trip back to Earth would be one-way and final. Only the odd burble continued on the radio, sometimes strong, sometimes moving from direction to direction. Later, the radioman had reported another sound of like character, but weak and apparently originating far out in space. It was, he said, increasing in power. The news filled Rick with a vague unease.

He stood with Dalit Yo near the summit of the cave-dotted slope. The distant sun was going.

"Tell me of Earth," Dalit Yo said quietly.

Rick looked at the monotone sky, devoid of cloud, as always. "It is very different—green and moist. There are great rivers and seas,

tall trees, many people—"

The old Betian nodded slowly. "We have our legends of a green world." His gaze turned, direct and piercing. "If you return to Earth you will take us?"

Rick felt astonishment. "If you wished. I had not thought of it. But Earth is different, now." He thought of the great Eglinton Plant and dark cities below in the night.

"You still have what most matters—soil, rain."

"Yes. But those things had ceased to matter much to many of us." Impossible to explain, he thought. Earth's millions had slaved to produce baubles of no real worth. Sweating in the stink of their own industrial productivity, men had lost touch with simple virtues. He sighed. "You could teach us much, Dalit Yo!"

"Perhaps."

It was simple agreement, devoid of pride. Dalit Yo returned to his cave to sleep, and Rick went up to the crest above, unable to rest. West, the sky was deep red, blending with the red of the plain. East, it grew dark purple and black, blending with the horizon, featureless upon each hand. The slight wind of evening, that followed the sun, was going.

He searched the horizon again and frowned. Far away north a speck of light had glowed, so faint it might have been imagination. Or sunlight reflected from some high metallic strata? No, he decided. Instead of diminishing, fading as it should as the sun went, it was increasing, though still so distant as to be only a pin-point of blue.

While minutes ticked by he gazed. The blue was growing steadily stronger, resembling now a single vivid reflection from some precious stone. It sank from sight, then rose, clearer, and he knew that it was following the configuration of the ground.

He withdrew a little so that retreat down into the caves would be more easy, if necessary. The pinpoint was resolving into a perfect sphere of vivid blue that travelled with smooth rapidity over the ground. Its size and exact distance were difficult to judge, but Rick estimated that its speed easily exceeded by many times the maximum the truck could put up.

It grew, and he decided it would soon be very near. Without sound, shimmering oddly, somehow lacking any appearance of physical solidity, it was unlike anything he had ever seen. Its even, rolling motion was such, he judged, as would make an indentation like that beyond the old city.

At a few hundred yards it slowed to a halt. It was perhaps ten feet in diameter, he thought. Shimmering, yet not in any way

frightening . . . No, he thought, it was harmless . . . Cool green fields floated up before his gaze. Involuntarily he stepped forward. *Harmless*, he thought. Blue sky, fleecy with cloud, extended over the green fields. A river ran under trees, water cool and inviting. He walked on, hastening now.

Wonderful to know rivers and trees still existed, he thought blissfully. Flowing water tinkled in his ears. A cool breeze stirred among the trees, bringing the smell of green fields . . . He began to run, half stumbling, eyes fixed on the blue, shimmering sphere that somehow seemed the hub of the whole panorama. He must reach it quickly, he thought . . . must reach it before the scene faded

"Stop, Earthman!"

The command shot into his brain with the incision of a steel blade. He halted, stone.

"Come back, Earthman!"

He turned slowly. The scene was unreal. The green fields and trees were hazy, a fading view projected as if against dusty slopes. Outlined against the sky stood Dalit Yo, straight and still as if carved.

"Come back —"

Rick looked unsteadily at the blue sphere, hub of the wonderful scene. There was no river, he thought . . . no green trees . . . Instead, the sphere had somehow opened on the side facing him. Trembling, he turned and stumbled back up the slope.

Dalit Yo took his arm, leading him down towards the caves. The blue sphere did not follow.

"You—you read men's minds," Rick said unevenly. "That was how you knew our language."

Dalit Yo halted within the mouth of the cave, looking back the way they had come. "It is an ability we have possessed many thousands of years."

"But the—" Rick felt at a loss for words. How to describe all he had seen, if he saw it, he had? All had been so real, so compelling.

"I understand," Dalit Yo said quietly. "I saw as with your mind. I was in my cave, but watching you. Scenes sprang to your brain such as I knew could not exist here. I came quickly."

"The sphere—?"

"I do not know. I tried to touch it with my mind but could not. There was a brain, a seat of reasoning, there—but alien, frightening, unlike your mind or mine."

Rick saw that the other was shaking visibly. His lined face was pinched, his lips thin and tight. He looked at Rick.

"Alien," he said. *"Horrible."*

They remained in the cave, the dim light at its mouth fading. A faint whispering of dust grains upon the rock, carried on the soundless wind, filled the night. Rick sat on the floor, elbows on knees and chin on hands, gaze seldom straying from the oval of dim sky. Dalit Yo spoke only once.

"I and my people will not stay here, Earthman. It is not safe."

The alien waited, attending the arrival of its fellows. There was much it could do, investigating the planet upon which it had settled. But new thoughts repeatedly came within the orbits of its consciousness, and for many days it brooded unmoving on the isolated rocky pinnacle. Visions of a watered, plant-covered world had sprung into the elementary biped's mind when the alien had adopted its usual method of making visible at conscious level a victim's deepest unconscious yearning. Such a green planet would be an ideal world, the alien decided. It must be found. If other of the elementary bipeds lived there, and objected, they could be eliminated. Content with the plan, it waited.

Dalit Yo adjusted the woven satchel on his back. "There was a spring far to the west," he said. "We shall go there."

Rick stood with his back to the wide caterpillar tracks of the truck and eyed the aged Betian and his companions. All were equipped to move; all similarly sure it was folly to stay.

"At least let us take you," he urged.

The other shook his head. "Your ways are not our ways. We are accustomed to many days without water."

"And just how long is it since any of you went to this spring you speak of?" Steve Wallsend put in from the driver's seat.

Dalit Yo did not reply. He said something in a flowing, melodious tongue which Rick did not understand, and the others lifted their packages to their shoulders. They turned their faces to the west, winding in single file up the hillside. Rick watched them pass from view over the slope, the glow of the morning sun at their backs. With the truck he had explored almost a hundred miles westward—and found a hundred miles of barren desert.

"That leaves us on our own," Wallsend said regretfully. He reversed the truck, pointing it back up the slope towards the remote, unseen ship.

Remembering his uneasy night in the cave, Rick felt Dalit Yo was justified. The sphere had gone by dawn, but the line it had made in the sand resembled that at Zirreh. Dalit Yo's companions had begun to appear with the first light. No words passed and Rick supposed

they had been in communication during the whole long night.

"Now what?" Reni Simon asked from her seat at the back of the open truck.

Rick climbed up into the vehicle. Jack Simkin watched him, cheeks drawn in so that his face was even more thin. Steve Wallsend tapped the driving wheel with his fingers.

"We need some definite plan," he said.

Rick nodded. "The ship is our safest H.Q. We must keep watch, in pairs when possible. How does her fuel make out?"

"Just as we expected. There's enough for perhaps one trip round this planet, and the return to Earth. We've none to spare for repeated take-offs here."

"So you intend to go back?" Reni asked.

Wallsend did not reply. Rick guessed his thoughts. Beta I was inhospitable. Yet Earth was now an unknown quantity; their only knowledge of her was negative, arising from her complete radio silence during take-off, when no contact with the *Solar Royal* had been attempted. If they made the trip back to Earth it would be one-way and final.

The girl put a hand in the pocket of her jeans and took out a phial. Rick recognised it and the silvery insects it contained. Her cool grey eyes rose from it to the horizon.

"Even they can't live without food," she said, and tapped the bottle. "They die unless they're given fresh sand. What does that suggest?" She smiled slightly. "Not that they eat it, but that it contains food."

"Contains food?" Rick echoed, astonished.

"Yes—an answer which poses another problem. But I believe I've solved it." She jumped down and scooped up a handful of the powdery dust. "Sand," she said. "Sand, earth—and pollen."

"Pollen?" Wallsend's thick brows rose.

"Yes, carried almost the whole day round by the wind—light, dry, dusty grains, but food for the sand lice. Pollen must come from plants, and we know the direction of the prevailing wind."

Rick saw what she meant. Continuously, in infinitesimal particles, a thin scattering of pollen was deposited with the dust and sand. And it could have only one source—living plants. It was their most important discovery since touchdown.

He felt enthusiasm returning, higher than since Bob Ross's disappearance. "We need a full-scale expedition, with all the stores we can carry and drums of extra fuel for the truck." He turned his face to the gentle wind. As always, it was depositing a thin layer

of dust upon everything. It came almost continuously from the east, and he wondered if Dalit Yo had for once been in error when he struck off westward.

"If we fail, we could make one circular trip in the *Solar Royal*," Wallsend said.

"We'll prepare," Rick decided. "We'll need radio in the truck, to contact the ship as we travel, and as much fuel as we can carry."

He guessed that more days would drag by. If the expedition was to be of any real use it must be carefully prepared. It would take them out into uncharted wildernesses far removed from the safety of the ship.

They hastened preparations. Additional tanks of fuel were installed, raising the vehicle's cruising range to a figure which Rick estimated as near 800 miles. The half-track had never been intended for such forays, but should do, unless some major breakdown arose. Transmitting and receiving equipment was fitted, with compass and navigation aids. Rick felt they could do no more, with the means to hand.

They set off dead east by compass at earliest dawn. As he watched the ship sink away behind, Rick wondered whether the tiny party of which he was a member had been most wisely chosen. Yet circumstances had dictated the choice, he thought. Wallsend must stay with the *Solar Royal* to take her up if some unexpected danger arose. Reni had to be on the truck, to study the incidence of pollen, their only guide. A crewman named Field, of whom he had seen little, completed the party, as relief driver. Simkin had been left behind protesting.

The ship was lost in the dust haze before they had covered two miles. The brown plain slipped past at a steady 20 m.p.h. and Rick stood in the open truck studying the horizon through binoculars.

"Like being in a desert, or at sea," Reni said from her seat.

Swaying to the movement, he nodded. "The towns and settlements would have been in valleys, by water. As the planet lost its water centuries of dust storms would fill the depressions. The towns would be lost one by one. Zirreh may be the last—and in another thousand years every building will be covered."

Behind and far ahead were slight rises, but north and south he could pick out a continuation of the depression they were crossing. He wondered if some great city lay below, immured for ever in the dust. The depression was browner than the surrounding higher ground. Was this a new explanation for the tinted hollows of Beta, he wondered. Were they valleys—dust-filled outlines of great water-

ways of thousands of years before ? Did moisture still seep down those covered waterways so that the spores Reni had found grew briefly, changing the brown for a while to dusty green ?

He tried the radio, signing off after contact was assured. Field watched him from the driver's seat, keeping the vehicle on compass bearing at economical speed. Dust drifted in a plume behind them, carried slowly on the prevailing east wind. After five hours they halted. Rick stretched his legs and watched Reni gather sand and perform what she termed a pollen count.

"Over 5 per cent. higher already," she stated.

They checked the wind bearing and found it veering slightly, whether due to daily change or other cause they could not decide.

"It would be wise to stay here until dawn," Rick suggested. "We can check the wind bearing every hour, and set our course by the mean reading."

He sat in the shade of the truck and wondered if they had been wise to come. Had the trip of the *Solar Royal* itself been wise ? Impossible to decide. Compared with Beta, Earth must still be a paradise . . . or was that only a hopeful guess ? He sighed, wondering what had happened to Bob Ross.

"Damned rotten planet, isn't it ?" Field said unexpectedly from his seat.

Rick looked up at him. Field had pushed up his goggles and revealed two clear patches against the grime and dust of his face.

"Suppose so."

Field grunted. "Dry as hell and half as cheerful." He stood up and dust fell from the wrinkles in his clothing. His boots sank ankle deep as he walked round the truck. "Whole place is dead," he stated with conviction. "Was dead when we were chipping flints !"

He hunched in the shade. Rick took another wind reading. The bearing had veered ten degrees south and he felt uneasy. Its strength had increased, too and its dryness and burden of dusty particles reminded him of the arid, suffocating sand-winds of Africa and Asia. To windward, the lower half of the vehicle's metal tracks was already covered.

Reni had put her equipment away. "A brisker wind than we've seen," she said.

He nodded, wondering what it would be like on the open plain if a real simoom sprang up. Visibility had already decreased, and grit stung his eyes when he removed his goggles.

She got into the truck, looking round, and he saw her stiffen. "Come up here, Rick."

He wondered at the new edge to her voice. She pointed into the brown haze as he gained the top step. He raised the binoculars, focusing, and drew in his lower lip quickly. Four blue dots were rolling in line near the horizon. Bright as specks of brilliant light, they seemed to be running parallel with the half-track's course. Even as he stared dust whiffled up nearer, obscuring the view and he could not be sure whether they were slowing or changing direction.

"We must keep a look out and be ready to move," he said.

He told Field what they had seen. Field was silent, but his face had a pinched expression.

By dawn the wind had returned to its prevailing direction. Rick contacted the ship. The operator's voice replied, then was replaced by that of Wallsend, who listened to the report with occasional grunts of affirmation.

"We've sighted half a dozen of the rolling spheres round the ship," he said. "The midnight watch saw them first. Don't know what to make of it."

Rick thought of the vision that had lured him from the caves, so real, momentarily sweeping away consciousness of danger. "Better all stay inside," he suggested. "If danger arises, take the ship up."

"Yes—"

From the tone he knew what Steve Wallsend was thinking. One or two hops by the *Solar Royal* and there would be no going back to Earth, ever.

They drove in turns throughout the day with only two stops for pollen counts. Both showed a rise. Once, on the limit of the horizon, a bright blue dot matched its path and speed to theirs for a full hour. Rick watched it from the back of the swaying truck.

Towards evening the wind again increased. Needing rest, they decided to camp. The morrow would see them at the outmost limit of their trip, with half the fuel gone.

The flying dust kept low and for the first time Rick could pick out one or two of the major constellations near the zenith. A moon hung very low, red and dim.

They watched in turns. Rick awoke at midnight, taking Field's position. An hour had gone and he was scanning the horizon yet again when something at higher altitude drew his gaze. Far off but approaching, apparently very high, it had the odd appearance of a cluster of floating globes. Each was a dim silvery grey and all seemed to rotate round a common centre. Binoculars trained, he followed them as they slowly came overhead. Thin pink rays extended between each globe and its fellows. There were ten in all, locked like balls on

a wire frame, the nine at the perimeter rotating evenly round the tenth. All passed slowly from sight, soundless and smooth as a cloud. Rick relaxed, and was aware that the hairs of his scalp had stiffened as in some unconscious primordial expression of fear.

He watched a while, then opened up the dust-proofed radio. Wallsend must know that there was another craft on Beta, he thought. And one whose overall diameter fully equalled the length of the *Solar Royal*

He called twice without reply. A background of static proved the receiver was operating and he frowned. Radio watch on the ship should have been continuous for just such an eventuality as this.

Minutes dragged on and his annoyance changed to unease. It was impossible that the bleating of the automatic equipment on the ship should not by now have aroused someone. After ten minutes he woke Field, who sat up with a start.

"There's no reply from the ship!" he said.

Field looked astonished and Reni appeared from under one of the dust canvases.

"Perhaps there's some breakdown," she hazarded.

"Why should there be—and they have other equipment."

Rick tried the set again while they watched. At last he abandoned it. "The ship's not hearing us, or unable to answer."

He repeated the call at half hourly intervals until dawn with the same lack of result. He wondered if the radio silence justified turning back, and decided against it. A simple explanation probably existed, and they had already come so far. Better to hurry on to the outward limit of exploration, then return.

Towards noon the vista ahead took on a rising character, as if once high tableland. Long, low ridges ran parallel with their course and they followed the top of one permitting a wide view in each direction. Miles ahead the ground was of a yellowy colour.

"Another hour and we shall be down to half our fuel," Field said, driving.

The yellow grew more distinct, extending each side farther than binoculars could reach. From half a mile Rick could see it was not the earth alone. Tiny plants, bushy and scarcely a hand's breadth high, thickly dotted the whole area. Dusty and fragile, they sent up clouds of spores under the truck's weight. The spores rose on the wind, drifting west like smoke.

Rick sat frowning on the step while Reni made quick tests. The disappointment on her face was obvious. She put the apparatus away.

"This is where the pollen comes from."

He stirred the arid, scorched plants with a boot. "You're sure?" "Absolutely," she said. "It's unmistakable."

They drove through the drifting cloud to a rise. Beyond, the peppery yellow plants extended to the horizon. No sign of water interrupted the dusty expanse of desert. No feature on the horizon warranted further exploration.

Disappointed, Rick gave the order to turn back. The vast area of arid plants fell away behind. Dust rose from the tracks, following them, now, so that they rode in a cloud of their own making. The wind was brisker. Each attempt to regain radio contact failed. They would drive in shifts, he decided, so as to waste no more time.

The hours passed monotonously. Rick spent many periods at the radio, hearing nothing, and his fear that much was wrong grew to certainty. If she had taken off for safety, contact could have been maintained. Short of her complete destruction, or the absence of her crew, there seemed no explanation. If absent they were, it was not from choice. They could travel no useful distance on foot, and would in any case never leave the ship unmanned.

Night came and he wondered of Ross and Earth. Dust hid the heavens and he longed for the clear sky of home. The course was maintained by compass bearing, a spotlight casting a seesaw beam ahead. Evidence for a successful attack on the ship appeared conclusive. Noon should bring them within sight of her.

The sun rose red at their backs, throwing their shadows before them across the few score miles remaining. Field roused himself from a rest period during which he had obviously not slept and took the wheel. Rick brushed the eternal brown layer from the radio and opened it.

"Still trying?" Reni asked. Her face was dusty up to the rim of the goggles, her overall powdered as a miller's.

He nodded and switched on, waiting for the set to heat. First was silence, then a signal immeasurably weak and distorted so that it was unintelligible. His fingers grew tight on the controls. It was the *Solar Royal's* frequency. Yet the signal was so weak he could be sure of no single word, except that it seemed to be a call repeated over and over.

Reni was watching him. "They've—moved?"

He was silent, listening. He would have expected a more powerful signal even with the ship half a hemisphere away, or a full fifty thousand miles up in clear space. The *Solar Royal's* equipment was powerful, designed for interplanetary communication. There was an odd fluttering distortion, too, such as he had never encountered before.

"Don't know what to make of it," he admitted at last.

As they rode on the signal did not change, never rising above the background noise. Rick looked ahead and at his watch. The half-track must go, her fuel sinking. An hour would show.

The configuration of the low slopes ahead slowly took on familiar lines, drawn out to give a view of the plain where the ship had descended. He stood in the swaying truck, binoculars to his eyes, anxiously searching a first glimpse of the tall rocket.

The view opened suddenly as they crossed the top of a long, rolling ridge. A shock ran through Rick. Simultaneously Reni, standing at his side, gave an exclamation, and Field halted the truck so abruptly that they stumbled.

The *Solar Royal* stood intact exactly as she had landed, but encompassed by a shimmering dome of transparent green radiation. Exact as a perfect sphere divided in half, it looked fully five-hundred yards in diameter. The ship stood in its centre like a model in a dust-cover, Rick thought, astonished.

Field reversed the truck so that it was behind the brow of the ridge. His face was pale under the dusty grime and he slid from behind the wheel.

"What—is it?"

The words trembled. Rick felt no surprise at Field's terror. It was frightening to return and find the *Solar Royal* cut off from them. The rolling spheres, the strange silvery ship, and now this, Rick thought. It was clear some other agency was interested in Beta, and intended to contest possession. And indications were suggestive of considerable technological development.

"I think they're following us," Reni said, her voice very small.

A blue sphere was rolling into view up the distant slope. It gained speed, bounding over the dust as it swept towards them in a long curve. Rick scrambled into the driving seat, starting the truck with a jerk. Sand shot up from under the spinning tracks and she heaved into motion, engine screaming. A glance showed them their speed was too low. The sphere gained rapidly, overtaking them at a distance of scarcely ten paces. For a fantastic moment he had a vision of its shimmering outline. It seemed of no solid material, but a globe of blue energy, in which rode a strange, single being little more than four feet tall, of creamy white, and with six triangular appendages, four of which were clasped around controls in the centre of the sphere. Then the thing was gone, speeding on ahead through the dust, curving away back towards the great dome surrounding the ship.

Field and Reni clung to the truck's handrails. From a high

hillock Rick saw a dozen of the blue energy capsules sweep up into view behind them, following. Then the half-track bounded down to lower ground and they were lost to sight in the depression.

"What to do?" Field yelled above the engine.

Rick knew what he meant. The fuel would soon be gone, even if they could outdistance the objects speeding behind.

They swept down the gentle slope at full throttle. Without warning the ground ceased to give support. The truck lurched, falling, and dusty sand closed over their heads, choking away light and air instantly.

Rick struggled upright in his seat, automatically holding his breath, and found himself free but in stygian darkness. The lamp belted to his waist was intact, and lit at his touch.

The silent truck was half on its side and two-thirds covered with sand and dusty earth, which convulsed as Reni appeared, then Field, coughing and gasping. Close at their backs was shelving rock; higher, the peak of the avalanche of sand which had descended with them. Its downward movement had ceased, and no crack of daylight showed. Almost knee-deep, they were in some underground crevasse. Rick listened, and could hear nothing but his own breathing. If the bounding blue energy spheres passed overhead they made no sound.

"We'll never get the truck out!" Field said.

His voice was muffled in the confined space. Rick wondered whether they themselves could escape, or whether the sand would merely slide down under their feet. He sat on the projecting step of the truck and put out his lamp. The absolute darkness was nowhere relieved.

"It may be wise to stay here a bit," he suggested.

"To escape them up there?" Reni was unseen. "They may not know what's happened."

He ceased looking for daylight and put on the lamp. The others were pale under the grime and he wiped his face.

"If we go up now we haven't a chance."

"Better wait for night," Field put in. "We can scout on foot."

Rick tried to clear the truck radio, then abandoned it. Each time they scooped away sand more slipped down from above, finer particles rising so that they coughed.

An hour passed. Silently because he had nothing to say, Rick wondered how those in the ship were withstanding the siege, or if they still lived. The dust subsided, and he noted how relatively clear and fresh the air was. Apparently they had fallen into no mere pocket covered by drifting sand, but into a cleft of some proportions.



He rose, following the walls of the narrow space which the light revealed. Opposite the truck the sloping sand did not touch the roof. Instead was a space through which a man might crawl.

"Looks worth investigating," he said.

He wriggled into it. Sand pressed his stomach, and the rock his back, then the sand fell away and it was possible to stand. Reni came behind, and Field, slithered down amid the brown dust. He undid a zip pocket and cleaned his goggles, forehead wrinkled.

"If I hadn't lost my sense of direction I'd say this led towards the ship!"

Rick felt inclined to agree, though it was little more than the prompting of some sixth-sense. Field seemed more collected, and he was glad. There was no room for panic—not that the crewman could have been blamed.

In places the fissure was sheer sided, a great crack in the rock as of some enormous movement of the crust of ages before. It ran straight as a line and walking became easier, the bottom changing to hard, dry mud obviously undisturbed for centuries. As time passed Rick wondered if some hands other than those of nature had helped to fashion the

cleft, or smooth away projections and widen narrow spots. It was difficult to be sure.

The fissure showed no sign of ending, and cautious elation began to replace his initial dismay. He tried to deduce its most probable direction. If the truck had not turned round in falling, it was towards the ship.

They rested once, and he saw that the same possibility was in his companions' minds. Hope was replacing the despair in Field's eyes, and Reni had a determined look upon her face, such as he had not seen for many days. The character of the rock began to change, as they went on, resembling the sandstone of the flats upon which the *Solar Royal* stood.

"Wonder how far we are from the surface?" Field said.

Rick wished he knew. The cleft had seemed to descend, but now rose almost imperceptibly. It was more irregular, narrowing and widening. After passing fallen stone, both shoulders brushing the walls, Rick halted. Ahead, luminous in the dark, was a green, shimmering wall.

"The dome," Reni breathed.

He advanced slowly. The cleft opened out and the shimmering wall completely obstructed it. It exactly resembled the side of the dome he had seen, and just such a slight curvature as would be expected. He stayed the others with a hand.

"Wait."

Moving slowly, he went on alone. The green surface was transparent, so that he could see the rocks beyond, and disappeared into the sides of the cleft as if the presence of earth and stone meant nothing. He licked his lips, his tongue dry. This was the least expected yet most logical development, he thought. The *Solar Royal* was not captive under a mere half-sphere dome, but centred in a complete sphere which extended through the planet's crust as readily as through the air above.

At a few paces' distance he could hear a slight humming, as of a violin string under a bow that never halted. He tossed a pebble at the surface. It rebounded without sound. He searched for a larger rock, flung it, and saw it halted as by a steel wall. The green surface itself, shimmering like water, proved to be cool to the touch, resisting his fingers like ice. The largest stone he could lift, flung with all his strength, rebounded from the wall like a pea from a windowpane.

He was about to retreat when movement beyond drew his gaze. A man, slight, untidy, thin-faced. Jack Simkin, Rick realised. He had arisen from near the wall beyond and was pounding on the

screen. His light blue eyes were round, his face distorted. His lips opened and his tongue showed in an unmistakable bellow, soundless as mime beyond the gently singing barrier. As if realising the futility of calling, he began to gesticulate, pointing above and behind. Bare inches from his face, Rick tried to show that he could not hear, did not understand. Simkin seemed not to follow him. Abruptly he began pounding the transparent wall again, then his lips opened, he turned, and began running back down the cleft. Rick saw that he had no light, and his bobbing form disappeared in the gloom beyond.

Shaken, Rick turned away, and saw that the others had witnessed Simkin's terror and flight. The spherical screen was impregnable from below and above alike, suppressing even the passage of radio waves from the ship.

"We must go back," he said flatly.

Their footsteps were not now lightened by hope and Rick felt that the previous twenty-four hours would have exhausted any man. Disappointments and difficulties had multiplied sharply, bringing a situation of great peril.

He forced tiring limbs on, dogged by the memory of Simkin's face beyond the screen, his frenzied, silent shouting, and flight. Reni stumbled, and he took her arm. Behind, Field walked like a man reaching the limit of exhaustion. They had not retraced half their way when Rick knew that they must rest—sleep, if possible. They sat on the floor, backs to the wall, and he turned off the lamp, whose beam had dimmed appreciably. Absolute silence and darkness enfolded them.

A thin wind whispered across the undulating plain, gently moving the folds of Dalit Yo's garment. Unhearing, unseeing, he gazed into the east, hazed now with dawn. All night fear deep within other minds had tugged him, hastening his steps. Those minds were not of his companions, but akin to them. Earthmen. Instinctively he wished to help, if he could, against the strange, powerful alien beings that had found the planet. The Earthmen had offered to help him, too, by giving passage to the young, green world from which they had come. Dalit Yo longed for its sanctuary.

Some of the minds were quieter, now, as if they slept. Deeper lines had come to Dalit Yo's sage face. In his wisdom he knew he must give help for help offered, and save the Earthmen, if he himself and his race were to be preserved, with all their age-old knowledge. He stirred, falling into a wiry step which he could maintain for twice the rising and setting of the sun.

Rick awoke and switched on his lamp. Its weak light revealed the buried truck and a descending trickle of sand, whose whisper had roused him. He had lost count of passing time, or of the hours during which they had toiled along the cleft.

More sand descended, dust puffing up. A steady trickle changed into a miniature avalanche. They got up quickly, backing.

"Something coming," Field said hoarsely.

Sand slipped thickly, carrying a wriggling body that by some miracle did not lose its feet but slid down within a pace of Rick, who felt a vast relief.

"Dalit Yo!"

The other shook dust from his garment. His face was placid, but his eyes keen as they darted round the limits of the cleft.

"I felt you were troubled," he said simply. His gaze passed beyond them into the dark. "It is many centuries since this channel has been used. The sands covered it—"

"Until we fell in," Rick interjected.

"As you say." Dalit Yo considered them pensively. "It is now night outside—a good time to leave."

"Our ship is still there—still surrounded?"

The old Betian was silent for long moments. "Yes. I see it, and a glistening dome through which nothing can pass. I feel the minds of your companions, though uncertainly. They plan something, but are afraid. They are full of doubt."

He dropped silent and Rick saw he could tell them no more. Contact between the planet's natives might well be perfect; but between Betian and human it was not.

More sand descended, and a young native whom Rick had seen with Dalit Yo. Strong, wide-shouldered, his face had the same kind tranquillity.

"Amami," Dalit Yo stated simply, "son of my son."

They pulled down sand with their cupped hands until a hole appeared, and Amami lent strong shoulders and muscular arms to help them up. Rick saw that the dry sand had shelved down into the cleft in such a way that only a slight depression showed its presence. Truck and men had virtually disappeared without explanation.

Dim moonlight illuminated the surrounding dunes, shrouded in silence so deep as to refute the existence of anything other than the age-old stars. Shadows rose from the sands, and Rick saw a knot of Dalit Yo's companions had waited motionlessly. He listened, gaze following the horizon. Nothing stirred.

"We should go this way," Amami said quietly, and moved off,

following low ground.

Their feet whispered in the dust. Somewhere behind Rick heard Field's voice, and a low reply from Dalit Yo. There were unoccupied caves, concealed by the marching sands, where only one small entrance was exposed. There, they should be safe.

Amami moved quickly and Rick seldom let his eyes' stray from his back, almost unseen in the gloom. Only once did he speak.

"Perhaps we could draw free your vehicle, Earthman."

Rick wondered if it would be much use. The fuel was low, and could not be replaced except from the *Solar Royal*. But there were stores aboard which they might need.

"Do, if you can without danger," he whispered.

Amami nodded, going on. Time passed and in the silence Rick wondered what Reni thought of the situation. He slowed, letting the others pass him. Field and Dalit Yo were last. Reni was not there. The shock of his discovery made him halt.

"Where is Reni?"

Field hesitated, Dalit Yo with him. "Miss Simon? I thought she was in front with you."

Rick saw his error. He himself had assumed she was bringing up the rear with Field. The others had halted, barely visible in the dark. He looked back over the spreading dunes and knew he could not abandon her. It was impossible.

Field stirred uneasily. "We've come miles."

Rick did not look at him. "Go on with the others! I'm going back."

He watched them disappear. Only when they were gone from the dim limit of vision did he realise a lean shadow still stood at his elbow.

"I will come also," Dalit Yo stated simply.

Rick pressed his arm in thanks, and they began to plod back through the loose sand. He wondered by what sixth-sense Dalit Yo led the way among the shadowy dunes, never hesitating.

"It is a long way—a very long way, Earthman," he murmured.

Fatigued, Rick scarcely knew how time passed. He was aware of a seemingly unending march, and of the sky slowly lightening so that he could see the aged Betian's belted form. The eastern light was strong when Dalit Yo halted. Rick saw that they were upon the edge of a saucer-shaped depression.

"It is here that your vehicle lies," Dalit Yo stated.

Despair seized Rick. Reni was not there. . . might have strayed anywhere along the way.

"She came up from the cleft with us," Dalit Yo said.

His aged face was set immobile as rock. Eyes closed, he stood as if listening. Rick saw, understood, and was silent. At last the wrinkled eyes opened and Dalit Yo's gaze settled on him.

"I cannot find her, Earthman. Her mind is—not thinking."

Rick's lips grew dry. "*Dead* —?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. She is—not thinking. I have touched her mind before, and could find it as the eye finds a spark of light in the night. Now all is dark. The spark is not there."

Wiry fingers closed on Rick's arm, sustaining him. Rick realised that fatigue and dismay had brought him very near to the limit of physical and mental exhaustion.

"I will tell you if I find her," Dalit Yo said. "I will watch for her mind as the traveller for his homing-fire."

As the light grew Rick cast about for signs, but the thin dust that always came on the wind had already obscured their footprints. Only in one place could he discover a long line drawn across the sand. It resembled that first seen at Zirreh. But whether left by a sphere that had been searching for the truck, he did not know.

"It is unsafe to stay," Dalit Yo warned at last. "Come quickly."

The way was circuitous, their progress slow, and the sun already high towards the zenith when they ascended a long, slow rise and emerged to a level giving sight of brown desert to the horizon. Rick halted. On the plain ahead and slightly below rested the curious alien craft. Its ten silvery globes appeared to be connected only by pink beams of light. Its overall dimensions astonished him.

"I have never seen such a thing," Dalit Yo breathed.

Rick studied the vessel, oddly resembling a peculiar wheel formed from metal balls joined by wire. "I have seen it flying. But it is larger than I supposed."

They withdrew to the brow of the slope. Several blue energy capsules appeared from beyond it, speeding away across the sands like self-motivated balls. After them, emerging from behind the ship, swiftly floated a device more strange than any Rick could have imagined. At front and back were vibrant green discs, large and small, supported on blue pillars that oscillated up and down with electric fire. At the bottom there appeared to be a long, black metallic rod. What it contained, and whether it was supported by the blue pillars, or other means, Rick could not see. It sped away across the desert, followed by four bounding blue spheres.

"They are going towards your ship," Dalit Yo stated.

The spheres and equipment of unknown purpose went from view.

Rick switched his gaze back to the ten units of the alien vessel, now resting without sign of movement. If Reni had been wandering over the dunes Dalit Yo would have known, he thought, and they would have found her. If captured, where else would she be taken but to the alien vessel? The deduction lent Rick new determination.

"I'm going down to search!" he said.

The old native's blue eyes settled on him. "It is not safe—"

"Sometimes things other than safety count most!"

Dalit Yo examined his face. "I see you will go. But at least wait until dusk. Watch until then."

That was wise, Rick had to admit. They dug a shallow trench in the sand and lay upon the ridge. The vessel was still; none of the rolling capsules in which the aliens transported themselves appeared. Nor did any return, or the curious equipment.

"I sense that your friends in the ship are afraid," Dalit Yo said once.

The sun was low with evening. Rick strained eyes and ears in the direction of the *Solar Royal*, standing to gain a more distant view. The slopes were without sound, but he could not be sure whether an intermittent green light did not flash and flicker away on the edge of the horizon, where the *Solar Royal* would be.

He ate sparingly from pocket rations, uneasy and irritated by the delay. The sun sank beyond layers of dust that obscured the sky with deep ruddy tints and the evening breeze began to whisper over the slopes.

"It is time I go," he said.

Dalit Yo held his shoulder. "Wait a little longer. It is still light. And I feel your friends are so in danger they plan something hazardous. They cannot agree. All are uneasy."

He was silent for so long that Rick rose in the gloom. "You can find what they plan . . .?"

"I am not sure," Dalit Yo said. "It is, perhaps, that they will try to flee from this planet—"

Rick felt shocked. Yet second thoughts made such a decision seem possible. Wallsend could not be sure whether truck and passengers alike had been destroyed. He might feel this was the last chance of saving the ship and his men in her might be driven by that consideration.

"They do not know you live," Dalit Yo stated. "I have tried to tell them but failed. I cannot make contact. There is something in the nature of the green dome that prevents my thoughts from entering fully."

Rick wondered what strange force held it in existence, and what catastrophe would engulf the ship if she tried to rise.

"Yes, I fear they will try," Dalit Yo murmured.

Rick wished the truck were free. There would have been a slender chance of contacting the *Solar Royal* by radio, before she was too far from Beta I. But without the radio they were helpless. Their very silence might be taken as proof that they were dead.

Each globe of the ten unit ship extended far above his head, dim silver and bulging outwards. The pink, connecting lines of force glowed faintly, emitting a thin, metallic crackling that never ceased. He moved under them into the space between the centre sphere and the outer ring of its companions.

An inner section of one was opened downward, so that its edge rested on the sand, forming a curved ramp up to a broad rectangular doorway. He entered.

No guard was present, nothing opposed him. Thus sure of their own power were they, he thought, listening and examining the four openings which converged on the entry lock. He took the left at random. After a few steps it opened into a chamber filled with neatly piled units of fragile crystal and complex metal connections. There was no exit, and he returned to the next opening. Beyond it was some type of power equipment which murmured softly within itself, but of a shape and nature which conveyed nothing whatever to him. He drew in his lower lip pensively as he surveyed the equipment. It was obvious that the newcomers to Beta I were technically advanced to a degree which made Earth sciences look as backward as flint hand-axes. He was astonished, too, at the almost complete absence of any mechanical devices. Instead, electronic methods seemed to predominate, as in the rolling blue energy capsules. Techniques at which he could not even guess were obviously employed and the very air seemed charged with static power.

The next passage opened into rooms on either side. Some were empty. Others contained more equipment of such a nature that he could not guess its purpose. Higher, he emerged again into sight of dim starlight, and found a transparent section of the spherical hull surrounding him. The other globular units of the ship were visible, and an extended view over the undulating sands.

In the middle distance were several rolling spots of blue which he recognised with a shock, intensified by a second glance, which showed the speed with which they were approaching. He descended quickly to the lower level. The spheres were near, rising and falling over the dunes. Outside was no concealment. He ducked back into

the first doorway.

The capsules slowed, curving towards the ramp, rolling up into the corridor he had vacated. He had an intermittent vision of strange beings crouched over controls at the centre of globes of hard blue light. Then as each sphere gained the corridor it ceased to exist, leaving only a slight, creamy being that held a curiously shaped apparatus, and walked quickly, with tiny steps, on into the ship. Each was smooth-skinned and fragile, pale as something grown in the dark. With four upper tapering limbs they carried the units from which the energy capsules sprang. The two lower limbs were slightly flattened, forming circular feet. Their heads were round, honeycombed with apertures over which thin membranes closed intermittently. Weakly creatures, Rick thought, surviving only because of the protection of the electronic devices they had created.

The last energy capsule did not vanish, but halted in the entrance lock. As through blue glass Rick saw a girl's figure curled in a sitting position, with long, smooth golden curls. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks white as marble. *Reni*. He almost called her name involuntarily. Then the curved section of the ship rose slowly from the sands, moving inwards to meet the hull. Sands and night sky were excluded as it came to rest, closed.

He stepped towards the blue, transparent globe, listening. The ship was soundless except for a remote humming, very low. Her builders were occupied elsewhere, he decided, and walked quickly round the sphere, staring in. It was ten feet in diameter, and its surface had the same cold, frictionless touch as had the barrier in the underground cleft. *Reni* Simon's smooth features were set as in deep sleep. He wondered if she had been taken by force or lured into captivity by some vision that fulfilled a deep subconscious longing.

Direct assault upon the sphere was clearly useless, and he retreated into the entrance to the store-chamber. Energy to maintain the rolling capsules must come from somewhere, he decided. Possibly it was generated in the ship itself, and radiated. His mind returned to the power plant in the adjoining room. It had seemed to be in action, yet the ship was at rest. If so, could it be the source of energy? Possibly, he decided. There was logic in the deduction.

He went cautiously into the entrance lock, and from there into the next chamber. The equipment still murmured quietly. Some parts seemed conductors, others insulators, but beyond that he could not go. In its heart intricate crystals glowed faintly, and from them the power seemed to come. With all his electrical and scientific knowledge he could not decide how the unit worked. His lips curved in a crooked

smile. Fortunately mere destruction did not depend upon exact knowledge!

From the store he chose an object which appeared the largest he could carry. Of many metal discs on a framework of rods, it proved just as much as he could lift. Arms clasping it, he staggered through the entrance lock with a last glance at Reni motionless in the blue sphere, then flung the gadget into the heart of the glowing crystals.

Coloured fire lanced round him, playing quick as lightning from the power unit to the walls. Yellow fumes rose. Metal conductors grew red, white, and sagged into dripping liquid, sizzling as it touched components below. Abruptly the light that had illuminated the chamber went out, leaving a dull red glow shining on the walls from the heart of the damaged apparatus.

Somewhere in the distance a quick, irregular chirping began. He sprinted for the entrance lock, lit by dim reflected light. The blue energy capsule had ceased to exist. Reni lay on the floor limp as a doll.

A thin crack showed the energy holding the flap shut was gone also. It balanced, then fell with a shock that sent up dust and sand far above his head. He swept her up and ran.

Only at the top of the first dune did he stop to look back. Half the pink rays connecting the ten spheres of the ship were snuffed out. But even as he looked one sprang again into being, and another, as if auxiliary equipment was taking over.

He ran on, panting, and became aware that another figure ran also, swift and sure, its path converging on his own. In the dimness he recognised Amami, who took the girl as easily as if she were a feather and put her over a shoulder.

"Dalit Yo, father of my father, sent me to watch, Earthman. We must hurry."

His free hand closed on Rick's arm, guiding him. They ran, not looking back, and only after several minutes did Rick halt. Ahead, surely, must be the cleft into which they had fallen. The *Solar Royal* and caves to which Dalit Yo had sent the others must be far away to their right.

Amami barely paused. "This is shortest—many of us working together have pulled your vehicle from the dust!"

Rick grunted understanding, scarcely realising the words were in reply to a doubt he had not voiced. His breathing was heavy, each step ankle-deep in loose sand. He hoped he could last out.

"It is not far now," Amami said.

They sped down a slight declivity. Far ahead, just visible in the starlight, stood the truck, surrounded by fully a dozen silent forms.

Rick wondered why they had not driven it to meet them

"We do not understand your machines." The words floated over Amami's shoulder.

He slowed, and Rick passed him. The Betians moved back on either side.

"Tell them to get in the back!" Rick cried as he took the driving seat. A glance by the dash light showed him every grain of sand had been brushed with painstaking care from every corner. Twined ropes of silvery fibre, looped over several shoulders, showed the means employed to free the truck.

Amami placed Reni on the next seat. "I feel stirrings in her mind," he stated. "When I first carried her it was quiet with a silence deeper than sleep. But now it awakes."

The engine started at the first touch and Rick thanked the designers who had made a vehicle virtually dust-proof, waterproof, and as durable as metallurgical science could devise.

Amami leaned from the back, a hand on his shoulder, directing him. Rick wished the fuel was not so disastrously low, exhausted by the eight-hundred mile trip to the dusty bush forest.

"What of Field and your other friends?" he asked.

Amami swayed to the rise and fall of the half-track. "I have thought with Dalit Yo. They are all coming from the caves and will join us."

"And after?"

"We cannot stay here. The things in the ten spheres are angry. They will search every hiding place."

Dunes rolled by and figures came on the horizon. Rick saw that Amami had communicated with his companions in the caves even as he was carrying Reni, so that they had hastened out. They climbed into the truck, making a score in all. A score, Rick thought. A score, out of millions.

"We are the last, there are no others," Dalit Yo said from the back. "It is well. Zirreh, Town on the Spring, was the last city. Our world is dead. Nowhere on her surface do other minds akin to ours think. If you cannot save us our race and people are ended."

Rick's gaze strayed to the fuel gauge, and back to the sloping sands ahead. Chances of safety appeared few.

"Another mind is waking," Dalit Yo said unexpectedly. "It is your friend."

"Where?"

Rick jerked the word out. Another mind! Bob Ross. It could be none other—freed by the damage to the ten-unit ship!

"Not near. I will show you."

A picture flickered momentarily into Rick's mind. Bob Ross stood uncertainly outside the alien's vessel, asfionished alike by his freedom and the ship. The image faded.

"I will try to help him," Dalit Yo said. "Silence has held his mind since walking beyond the door at Zirreh. He does not understand."

Rick took the vehicle in a half circle, dust showering from its tracks. Ross could not be left.

Guided by quick words in his ear he drove at maximum speed. Every moment he expected the alien ship to come into view, or a line of rolling spheres to rise over the slopes ahead. Instead, at last a dusty figure came staggering towards them, half falling. Dalit Yo relaxed visibly and wiped his brow. Amami leapt from the truck and lifted Ross, whose strength suddenly snuffed out.

"He has fainted," Dalit Yo said. "Now back."

The truck spun again under Rick's hands, swaying back across the slopes. Dark night sky flung down echoes from the engine, roaring with the thunder of full throttle. The fuel indicator lay almost on zero. Rick raised his eyes from it and found Dalit Yo observing him.

"Your machine will soon stop?"

"It will," Rick agreed.

A ridge rose slowly and he recognised the edge of the vast sandstone flats where the *Solar Royal* stood imprisoned. Field said something unintelligible. Looking back, Rick saw half a dozen blue dots of light rise momentarily into view far behind, then dip from sight, following. Evidently the damage had been made good.

Within minutes the green shimmering dome itself rose into view, luminous in the night. Rick slowed, undecided. Their present freedom could not last. The engine would fail, soon —

Pillars of vapour began to tower from the *Solar Royal's* stern, mounting skywards, yet retained within the dome. Rick jerked the half-track to a halt. The *Solar Royal* was trying to rise!

Flame joined the vapour and the great ship began to lift amid a turmoil of undispersed fumes. The dome was outlined starkly by the smoke it contained, and by the yellow radiance from the ship's tubes.

"It was this I sensed in their minds!" Dalit Yo cried.

The fury grew, the ship gaining altitude ponderously, her speed increasing. Her great shining bow struck the underside of the dome at its apex. For moments she seemed to hesitate, flame streaming vertically down from her tubes, impinging on the ruby-hot sand, and billowing up in great tongues. Then the lightning of unbalanced

potentials crackled from sky to dome, and dome to earth, glowing fitfully across the dunes. Like a giant eyelid opening the curving green swept back to the ground, was gone, then appeared again, slowly mounting to its first shape, electronic static playing round its advancing edges. The edges met; a shimmer ran over the dome, again complete.

Rick lifted his gaze to where the *Solar Royal* was mounting into the heavens on a pillar of flame, free and apparently unharmed.

"The radio! The radio!"

Field was yelling wildly, plucking his arm. Rick scrambled into the back of the truck, tearing away its coverings. Microphone to lips, phones on head, he kept calling even as the set warmed and the rocket-trail of the ship receded into the sky, fading with distance like a dying spark.

There was no answer. Wallsend presumed them dead, Rick thought. "*Truck calling Solar Royal. Truck calling Solar Royal.*" Yet radio watch should have been kept. It was a rule. "*Truck calling Solar Royal.*"

Field caught his shoulder, turning him and pointing. Away back over the dunes, still remote, slowly rose the alien ship, nine periphery spheres rotating slowly about the axial globe, and with its full network of pinky rays.

Damn, Rick thought. He licked his dry lips. "*Truck calling Solar Royal.*"

The pink rocket trail had gone from the sky, lost with distance. Then shatteringly in the phones:

"*Solar Royal* to truck. You still alive?"

Rick recognised the shocked tones of the radioman. "Alive and by ship site!" he snapped. "Give me Commander Wallsend!"

"At once, sir!"

Delay. Then Steve Wallsend's voice, urgent yet glad. "We thought you were finished. Shouldn't have waited as long as we did but for Simkin coming back with some tale of seeing you underground."

"Explanations later."

"As you say. Can you make it to Zirreh?"

"Perhaps."

"Then keep in contact and start driving!"

Field was already in the seat, watching. Rick explained quickly, briefly. The truck shot into motion.

"We used a lot of fuel getting clear," Wallsend was saying on the radio. "It's not safe for us to come back to the flats. By Zirreh we may be safe for a few hours. We'll drop there and wait."

The way seemed long. When at last they descended into the dry waterway beyond which they had first seen the caves, the rolling blue energy capsules were clearly in sight no more than a mile behind. One was outdistancing the others. All went from sight as the half-track swept up to higher ground and over the summit beyond the empty caves.

"The fuel won't last," Field said once.

But the engine continued to roar. Dalit Yo and his companions rode silently, and Rick wondered what telepathic communication was taking place between them. A few miles beyond the caves Bob Ross stirred, his colour returning. He looked round him, blinking, and seemed to comprehend.

"It—it was a mirage," he breathed.

Rick guessed of what he spoke. Information that the *Solar Royal* had landed safely came, with a crisp reminder: "We're waiting."

Rick left the radio to find Reni waking. Only after minutes did the blank expression leave her eyes. She put a hand to her forehead.

"There were trees outside the cleft. I went to look."

Her voice was weak, puzzled. *Trees*, Rick thought bitterly. Not on Beta I! He pressed her arm.

"Forget it. Rest a few minutes if you can."

The ancient towers of Zirreh came into view with the first dim light of dawn. The ship stood beyond on a flat area flanking the slope of the valley, distant, a mere needle. Behind the truck a single blue sphere bounded, gaining rapidly now, and Rick watched it with unease. It curved to pass them, its single occupant riding smoothly within the shimmering, spinning blue.

They are harmless! The thought rose into Rick's mind unbidden. *They have not tried to harm us. Now one comes alone, to prove they wish us no ill*

The truck slowed, and he knew that Field had suddenly realised the same fact, and was relaxing pressure on the accelerator. A bemused feeling of comfort and security swept over him, and Rick smiled to himself.

The aliens were harmless. He must stop the truck. It was silly to run away

The spinning blue globe curved round in front of the half-track, its occupant watching them. It slowed, dropping behind, then gained speed again, circling them. Rick watched it with no feeling of danger, now. *There is no danger*, his mind said. *Stop the truck, then all will be well.*

He leaned over, tapping Field on the shoulder. *They would stop.*

It was foolish to run away—foolish and unnecessary.

An arm lapped round his throat from behind, pinioning him. With astonishment he grew aware of Dalit Yo shouting in his ear. Simultaneously, Amami lifted Field bodily from his seat, dropped him in the back of the truck, and took his place. The truck gained speed again, wobbling momentarily, then taking as even a course as Rick himself could have driven.

Rick closed his eyes. In his mind two elements were battling. A smooth voice insinuated that all was well and that he must stop the truck. Another urged that the smooth voice was a trick, and that they must escape. His senses reeled with the conflict. Then abruptly the smooth voice ceased. Dalit Yo relaxed, his grip removed.

"It is well," he said.

The bounding blue sphere turned again, making off. For a moment Rick saw its occupant, half standing, facial apertures opening and closing with furious rapidity, angry in its defeat.

"They attack from within," Dalit Yo murmured. "But we are old, and not easy victims."

The half-track roared on, circling the ruins and climbing the slope beyond. Mid-way between city and ship the roar ceased; the truck lurched, slowed, and stopped, engine dead. Rick shook away his mental confusion.

"Run for it!"

They ran, ankle deep in loose sand, abandoning the truck where it stood. From the *Solar Royal's* open port the cage lift wound slowly down. Above, Wallsend gazed out, hand raised to signal to a companion at the mechanism.

A scattered bunch of blue spheres sped from behind the ruined city, bounding up the hill. Rick wondered at the strange beings in them, and the curious sciences they employed. He stumbled, one leg hurting, but strong brown arms came round him, bearing him onwards.

"They'll catch us!" Field yelled.

His panic brought Rick's head round. A thin tracery of almost invisible lines stretched between the nearer spheres, forming a net that would sweep them up. The spheres were parting, intent on overtaking them on both flanks. Field, last, screamed, and sprawled on his face in the dust, tripped by some unseen projection. Two Betians, scarcely hesitating, bore him up and into the lift cage. It jerked into motion even as they crowded in, and Rick saw the tracery of lines sweep underneath, empty.

Swaying, the cage rose. They piled into the ship's lock. Winding

mechanism and cage were drawn in, and the lock closed. Steve Wallsend's hand closed on Rick's arm, drawing him flat against the cool steel.

"We've used three times the normal amount of fuel taking off last time."

Something in his tone halted Rick more than any personal danger yet encountered. He turned to stone, rigid against the ship's bulkhead.

"Yes—?"

Wallsend looked at the others quickly, then back. "I haven't told them—yet. There's not enough fuel to take us to Earth."

Rick felt his nerves taut as steel wire. The tone had hinted at this. But hearing it was a shock, nevertheless. He made a quick calculation.

"You could have reached Earth if you hadn't landed to save us," he stated quietly.

Wallsend lowered his gaze and put his fingers in his belt.

"Perhaps."

Rick knew what he meant. He had chosen to land, with the chance of saving them, to returning to Earth. Now, they had insufficient fuel. That fact was final. The first few minutes of flight, with its tremendous release of energy to fight the fierce pull of gravity, used more fuel than was consumed in a million mile trajectory in free space. Knowing that, Wallsend had landed.

"Thanks—for giving us the chance," Rick said.

It was inadequate, but all he could find to say. Once again the *Solar Royal* was a mere immobile headquarters, from which they could only stare out on the aridity of Beta I and wait

The ten-unit alien ship floated on the rim of the horizon, waiting for the bipeds' pointed vessel to rise again. In each of the ten spheres expectancy hung. Visions of green hills had sprung into each biped's mind, when remote hypnosis was used, and the aliens longed avidly for such a planet, upon which to settle and multiply. Now, their captains stood ready. The ten-unit ship could fly as a whole; or the pink force rays could snap out, freeing each sphere to its own course, to move at infinite speed.

In one sphere a technician manipulated controls and initiating signals danced from the extended aerals. Miles away equipment in a long, black metal rod awoke in response. Blue pillars of energy arose from its ends, capped by vibrant green discs. The whole gained speed moving over the dunes towards Zirreh. The technician signalled to a companion, and the message passed through the ten spheres. The device,

newest and most powerful creation of all they had invented, was on its way.

"It's not the actual distance that stops us," Wallsend said, "but the amount of fuel we use blasting off. Once we've gained free space and velocity we can travel almost any distance." He grimaced. "The other big consumption of fuel comes in landing. Without sufficient thrust to defeat gravity we'd leave a hole like a brick dropped in butter."

Rick nodded without turning round. The high control room of the *Solar Royal* permitted a view of many miles and something he thought he had seen before had moved into sight on the horizon. Though yet very distant, he could distinguish vibrant green discs that seemed to be supported upon hazy blue pillars, below which hung a huge black rod. It came fully into view, and he remembered. From the ten-unit ship, it had moved off towards the old rocket site not long before the *Solar Royal* had escaped.

Bob Ross sat hunched on a mushroom stool next the radioman's seat. He had told of the vision beyond Zirreh and of long unconsciousness while some external force seemed to sift his brain. Reni Simon, too, had related a similar story. Watching her face, Rick wondered if she regretted her trip. She could have been on Earth, in safety—if there was safety on Earth.

"Something is going to happen," he stated quietly.

They followed his glance. Steve Wallsend frowned deeply and a troubled expression came to Reni's face.

"What is it?" she asked.

Rick returned his gaze to the distant scene. The odd apparatus was larger than he had first supposed, and he could not pretend to guess its purpose. There was no parallel between alien science and Earth science, or common ground in technology or even appearance. The aliens' devices were a mystery. All seemed to function electrically, but the practical methods of working were beyond him, he readily admitted. He guessed that Dalit Yo and the others, in lower levels of the ship, must be equally ignorant.

Half a mile along the slope of the valley the device halted. Rick watched it intently as minutes dragged by and nothing appeared to happen. Only upon its nearest edge did a faint additional radiance play, scarcely visible in the daylight.

"The truck!" Ross said harshly.

Rick switched his gaze to it. The half-track was where they had abandoned it, but an encircling radiance, faintly seen, now extended

from it vertically into the air, a pillar whose top was remote as space itself. Smoke rose from the truck. It glowed, every metal part growing dull red. Simultaneously, as if the consuming power were some function reversing gravity itself, the vehicle rose, seating and lubricants aflame. It gained speed and height, grew white, then brilliant so that the eyes hurt to follow it. From the brilliance, incandescent drops of metal spattered, descending in silver rain. Within the space of ten heartbeats nothing remained but stirred dust and a thin grey smoke drifting away on the wind.

"Gone," Rick said, dry lipped.

In their ten-unit ship the aliens felt satisfaction. The molecular construction of the bipeds' crude mechanisms was evidently such as could be readily destroyed. The vehicle had volatilised more quickly than they had expected under the bombardment of the vertically polarised force-field. Watching from the horizon, their technician adjusted his controls, aligning the field upon its second and larger target.

As the hazy radiation round the ship grew in intensity Wallsend's hands went to the propulsion control buttons. Rick grasped his arm, staying him.

"Wait—"

Wallsend's face expressed astonishment. "If we wait we're finished, ship and all!"

The haze was growing in intensity, a pillar straight as a line drawn from heaven to earth. Before incandescence there were moments when the object to be destroyed ceased to have weight, he thought. More, some rearrangements of atoms caused actual repulsion, as if gravity were reversed. The twirling upwards movement of the truck proved that. He saw understanding come into Reni's eyes.

"He means we may rise!" she said quickly.

A sensation of weightlessness came, and growing heat. But the ship's hull was made to withstand the latter, Rick thought. They could last moments longer than the half-track.

The downward pull of gravity ceased. Almost as if mounting on her own jets the *Solar Royal* drifted from the sand, ascending in the beam. The edges of the observation port glowed visibly red and heat smote in as from a furnace. Wallsend swore, and Reni clapped her hands to her face. With scorched eyes Rick watched the red rim of metal turn to white, and the dunes of Beta I fall away below.

"Now!" he cried.

Wallsend's fingers moved like clockwork spurred into abrupt activity. Surging thrust awoke under their feet, bringing back weight

fourfold. The hazy sky-pillar slipped to their right, no longer enfolding them, and under the tornado blast of thinning atmosphere the port rim grew red, and the red faded.

Rick mopped his face. "Have we enough fuel to reach Earth and land?"

Wallsend gave him a quick look, snapped on an internal communicator, and issued quick orders. Minutes ticked by on the bulkhead clock while the altitude radarsonde crept up over the dial.

"We've just sufficient for the trip and touchdown, sir."

"Thank you." Wallsend faced them. "Do we go? It's our last chance."

He left it expressively at that and Rick wondered what the others thought. Earth had become an unknown quantity during their absence. Worse, Alpha Centauri's only planet was inhospitable, waterless, death even to Dalit Yo and his race.

"I vote for Earth," he said.

"And I," Reni added simply.

"Saints, but ain't ye daft even asking?" a voice demanded from the doorway.

They looked at Simkin and Wallsend smiled crookedly. "As you say—"

Beta I was a red disc almost distant enough to permit continuum shift when radar recorded something following. Astrogation bent a telescope upon it and reported ten silvery spheres, very large, no longer in cartwheel formation and following rapidly. Rick felt dismay. Earth was a speck so remote that no enemy would ever find her—unless shown the way

"I'll die here rather than lead them to Earth!" Wallsend growled.

"There is the continuum shift."

"We can't trust that will leave them behind—they've equalled anything man ever invented."

The *Solar Royal* drifted on, drive silent. The spheres drew closer, then curved away towards space and Rick breathed again. They were no longer following. Within twelve hours the ship's radar no longer reached them and he felt confident that the return to Earth was possible without betraying the whole planet into the power of the beings who, in turn, had been dissatisfied with Alpha Centauri's arid world.

"Good," Wallsend said and issued quick orders preparing for continuum shift.

Remote in space the aliens watched the needle-like ship, charting its course with equipment of extreme sensitivity. It was as they had supposed. The bipeds were fleeing for home. Very distant, the shoal of spheres curved in to follow their quarry. From the commander an order radiated: they must be ready for any shift into second-order space, but not draw near until the planet was pin-pointed amid the millions of systems of space.

"Thanks be we've left that stinkin' lot behind," Jack Simkin said expressively, wrinkling up his nose as the shudder of the final continuum shift subsided. "Too clever for my liking, the blighters were!"

Rick agreed, gazing through the ship's port for the first glimpse of Earth. He had watched it from the distance, a tinted ball growing in diameter, but too remote to seem real. Now, as breaks in the clouds swept below, he could see a long coastline against which lapped sparkling seas. Green slopes, woods and rivers, all were a miracle, doubly valued because once lost.

"It is a wonderful planet," Dalit Yo said eagerly at his side.

Binoculars brought the surface near. A town passed below, its streets greened. Nothing moved except a slow vehicle that puffed smoke and steam, laboriously ascending a hill. On the slopes beyond men worked with sickles, reaping corn.

Every scene told the same story, as the ship swept down, stern first, in her landing trajectory. Gone was the stink and rush of industry; gone the smoke of great factories and the busy streams of traffic. Gone, too, many people, Rick thought.

He recognised the landscape, now, though nature had crept in to transform roads to narrow tracks. Winchester sped past, abandoned. A great scar showed where fire had once swept unchecked amid the buildings. Then the *Solar Royal* site was under their stern, its rim of concrete specked by weeds. The ship sank upon a pillar of exhaust gases, contacted with a slight shock, and was still. With the contact came silence. A flying ship no more, Rick thought. A monument to the past, now—but *home*.

They unrolled the emergency folding metal ladder and descended to ground level. Rick stood by the ship, astonished. From a damaged building a man came, walking quickly. Grey, upright, of military bearing, but now dressed in shorts, with an open-necked shirt. Commander Prestigan, apparently little surprised.

"I guessed you'd come back," he stated. He looked skywards. "But I never imagined the ship wouldn't be alone."

Rick followed his gaze and a chill ran through his limbs. Locked now in cartwheel formation, the ten-unit ship was drifting slowly down, ready to land within a few hundred yards. Already the curved segments of each sphere were opening. Inside, Rick could glimpse a battery of peculiar devices. From the nearest a blue ray fingered across the site, striking the building Prestigan had vacated. The concrete and steel hummed, falling into dust. The ray turned slowly, shattering to fine particles the old office buildings near. Prestigan swore and Rick felt a new and complete despair. Earth, green, helpless, unprotected—

Ross alighted near him, jumping the last few feet of the ladder. "Hide until they land!" he shouted. "*Until they land!*"

The ten-unit ship sank lower, slowly revolving. Crewmen scrambled down the *Solar Royal's* ladder, racing for the cover of the circular anti-blast trenches fifty yards from her. Stunned with shock, Rick saw the silvery spheres touch ground, and a score of blue energy capsules bound out towards them.

Then the pink lines of light connecting the spheres snuffed out. The silvery lustre went from the globes, the blue capsules ceased to exist. Abruptly there was only a ring of fragile metal girders, spidery and weak, and a host of creamy, six-limbed beings that chirped madly, jabbing frantically at controls that no longer operated.

Never had he seen creatures so physically weak, Rick thought. Only by means of elaborate devices had they survived. He felt that men were immeasurably superior.

Far beyond the site, amid bushes that had sprung up thick and tangled, a yelping had begun. Out of the tall grass came a pack of dogs, every age, size and kind. Noses low, tails streaming, they swept down upon the tracery of silent girders.

Prestigan turned his back to the scene. "One of the dog packs. They won't harm us. There are a lot about this part of the country."

The others came down the ladder. Reni Simon took Rick's arm. "All considered, I'm glad I came that trip!"

Prestigan looked at her reprovingly. "I can't sack you because there's no job, even for me. Our specialists have figured it out well enough. The shock wave agitated atoms into electrical isolation, they say, so that no metal will conduct. The effect spreads immediately to conductors touching earth." He glanced momentarily at the scene from which he had averted his gaze. "It'll be a thousand years before equilibrium is restored, they say."



New Hard-Cover Science-Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

The most important book of recent months, to my mind, is a work on non-fiction titled **SCIENCE AND FICTION**, by Patrick Moore, F.R.A.S., and published by Harrap at 10/6. Its 192 pages hardly serve to do justice to the theme Mr. Moore has attempted, and in that may perhaps be found the reason for some of the faults of the book. Other reasons for the faults are that Mr. Moore is possibly not sufficiently acquainted with some parts of the s-f field, and that he has the expert's habit of making use of "all," "every" and "always" when these words are not truly applicable. When one says of a class of things that they "all" have such-and-such, the implication is that each and every one has been examined, and found to be so. When one says "always," again, one means "every time." When on page 134, speaking of mutants in s-f stories, Mr. Moore states "and the modern mutant is *always* repulsive and bloodthirsty, generally possessing several ears and (if female) a few extra breasts," he is being

very misleading. The emphasis on "always" is mine, and not Mr. Moore's. But, unemphasised, or not, the meaning is the same, and the statement is wrong. The next sentence commences "Moreover, mutants are invariably telepathic." Not "invariably," Mr. Moore, any more than "always." The "espers" of Alfred Bester's **THE DEMOLISHED MAN** are certainly telepathic, but they are not "repulsive," etc. Nor, for that matter, do all mutants in all stories fall into either the "repulsive" or the "telepathic" class.

In support of my statements that Mr. Moore may lack a sufficient knowledge of some parts of the field on which he has given an expert opinion, I quote from page 77: "If Astounding Science Fiction and its kind had monopolised the field there would have been no harm done, but between 1930 and the outbreak of war there arose . . . sensational magazines known collectively as 'pulp'." Mr. Moore either overlooks or does not know that the term "pulp"

was used to indicate periodicals produced in "pulp" format printed on "pulp" paper; the type of paper rather than the content being defined by the word. In this pulp class were detective, western and romance magazines, among others . . . and in the science fiction section of the "pulp" magazines was *Astounding Science Fiction*. Again, on page 148, discussing A. E. Van Vogt's *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, Mr. Moore refers to Ixtl as a "recent example" of a class of s-f creature. I take it from the text that by "recent" Mr. Moore refers to the stories of, for example, the post-war period, and obviously is not aware that poor Ixtl, "Discord in Scarlet," originally appeared in the December 1939 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*.

Apart from these things, and within the limits of his own very restricted definition of science-fiction, Mr. Moore has written a very useful survey of the origin and growth of the s-f with some remarks on the "horror comics" and indication that they have no connection with "true" science fiction or even with magazine science fiction (which in the main does not fall within Mr. Moore's definition of "true" s-f). He then discusses the modern magazine, based largely I suspect on the six issues of 1955 s-f magazine he admits he has read. Hardly a fair sampling, even of 1955's meagre output of some 150 magazines. Assuming that Mr. Moore's six magazines were "average," I hate to think what his opinion would have

been if he had been confined to certain magazines which I will leave unmentioned. Mr. Moore seems to be obsessed with the opinion that s-f is primarily "interplanetary" fiction, that all the stories have "gloomy" outlooks, and that s-f should (a) be educational and/or (b) have a meaning. By educational, it must be scientifically accurate and such weak excuses as overdrives for exceeding the speed of light cannot be permitted. Personally, I think a wider view is necessary. I'll agree with Mr. Moore that an overdrive for the sake of a "cops and robbers" yarn which could as well be played out on the lone prairie has no excuse; but if the spacedrive-gimmick is the one item of "suppose that" the author has allowed himself, and he then goes along to build the balance of the yarn logically on that premise, and that the yarn brings out some sound sociological or psychological point, then I say by all means let him have his gimmick. In any case, Mr. Moore himself adds the conditional phrase "though a good deal of licence must necessarily be allowed" to his requirements of scientific accuracy in his own definition of science fiction. And, in this field, each reader issues his own licence!

Recommended. If you are a fan, you will get the "irate-letter-to-the-editor" feeling on occasion . . . especially in reference to the "fan circles" item on page 181 . . . but at the same time, if you are a modern fan, able to take an objective view of this monster s-f that

has sprung up around us, you'll be able to see that Mr. Moore is talking some very sound commonsense from the "non-fan" reader's viewpoint.

Fictionally speaking, *THE ISOTOPE MAN* should appeal to Mr. Moore, if he likes detective stories. This is the latest novel from the pen (or typewriter) of Charles Eric Maine (Hodder and Stoughton, 11/6, 189 pages) and is only on the borderline of s-f. In fact the publisher has sub-titled it "a novel of the atomic age" and that is just what it is. Reporter Delaney, on loan to British weekly *View Magazine*, spots an "unknown" hospital case as atomic scientist Stephen Rayner. He advises the police and hospital of this, only to be advised in turn to mind his own business, the police having checked and found Rayner is at work in the atomic lab where he belongs. Unsatisfied, Delaney does mind his own business . . . trying to find out the "news" about Rayner and his double—whichever way round they are. Apart from the "time-slip" which has affected the Rayner in hospital—making his answers to questions quite illogical until Delaney points out the secret—and the atomic plant scenes there is nothing "s-f" about the story. Just the same, it is an excellent yarn worthy the attention of every s-f reader and non-s-f reader who likes detective yarns. This one takes us right back to the Mr. Maine of "Spaceways" . . . and is equally good. Incidentally, it is based on the screenplay "Time-slip."

John Wyndham now has another collection of his short stories on the market, *THE SEEDS OF TIME* (Michael Joseph, 12/6, 253 pages), containing ten items which show all sides of Mr. Wyndham's writing personality. Of course, it is quite possible that Mr. Wyndham will come up with something entirely different again, and surprise me but so far as it goes we have Mr. Wyndham the whimsical, with *Pawley's Peepholes*; Mr. Wyndham the nostalgic with *Time To Rest*; Mr. Wyndham the terrifying with *Survival*; Mr. Wyndham the subtle with *Dumb Martian* . . . and so on. Of course, even Mr. Wyndham gets confused with his own changes of pace, and writes two quite excellent stories based—more or less—on time-travel, both of them humorous. One I've mentioned above, the other is *Chronoclasm*. Perhaps the latter one was written by John the jovial . . . I don't know. I do know that this is a very fine collection by one of Britain's (if not the world's) masters of science-fantasy.

Mr. Wyndham makes yet another appearance on the scene as one of the trio of writers in *SOMETIME NEVER* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 12/6, 224 pages). The other contributors are William Golding and Mervyn Peake. "Envoy Extraordinary" is a story set in the past, a delightful item by William Golding. You can, after you have read it, decide for yourself whether it is set in the "historical" past, or a might-have-been past; Mr. Golding

kids the reader along all the way to the end of this fast-moving episode from a Rome that might-have-been . . . or was? All the reader's cries of "no, it couldn't have been" are neatly answered in the end . . . and new set of worries handed out.

In the middle of the book comes John Wyndham's **CONSIDER HER WAYS**, and frankly not quite what one expects from the author of the short collection just mentioned. First off, the story might have been a dream . . . except for the part following Jane's return from the future world of a beehive civilisation of women; Mothers, Workers, and all the usual what have - you. Admittedly, there are bits of Wyndham floating around here and there, especially in some of the conversations between the protagonist, Jane Waterleigh, and Laura—a historian, in fact, *the* historian of the future world in which Jane discovers herself trapped (in the body which is not hers). Laura is the only person who can recall the downfall and death of Man (male). And again John Wyndham takes over—the one we know—to give the story the final twist. But on the whole, a very pedestrian effort for Mr. Wyndham.

The final third is by Mervyn Peake, titled **BOY IN DARKNESS**, and of course that refers to Titus of Gormenghast, the central figure of those two nightmarish novels "Gormenghast" and "Titus Groane." To be frank, I disliked both these, and did not find this new adventure of Titus any

more to my liking. Despite the power of Mr. Peake's writing, the intense and horrifying atmosphere of the setting he reveals, the vivid meaning of the microcosmos of Gormenghast, I have never been able to sit down and read either of these books with any enjoyment. This despite the lucid and detailed explanation once given me by Dr. David H. Keller . . . And this I fear is again true of **BOY IN DARKNESS**; I do not need Dr. Keller to make clear the detail for me today, but still, I like it not. I'm sorry, Mr. Peake, for that . . . if I could enjoy it I know it would be really something. But please, you readers, don't let my personal prejudices get in your way. I think YOU will like it!

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SCIENTIFILM PREVIEWS

News and advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

A cablegram from editor Peter Hamilton has requested reports from me at once on several scientifilm previews. In failing to comply for him, H. G. Wells wrote the dialog 20 years ago for me to explain the reason why to him: "Tis not I, Boss," said the aviator in *THINGS TO COME*, "but the nature of things." The aviator couldn't do a proper job for the dictator of Everytown-1970, because he simply didn't have the proper materials to work with.

A certain parallel exists. Peter Hamilton is a dictator at least in that he dictates the policies of this, his magazine. While I am not an aviator, I have been known to fly high when reviewing a pleasing preview like *WAR OF THE WORLDS*, *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, *IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE* or *THIS ISLAND EARTH*. But due to a dearth of previews in the past two months it simply is not possible for me to implement your editor's request.

What I need is a time machine rather than a type machine, because within the next two or three days I expect to have seen *GRAVE - ROBBERS FROM OUTER SPACE*, and by the deadline of my next column it

is probable that *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN*, *CYCLOPS*, *THE MONSTER THAT CHALLENGED THE WORLD*, *THE LAND UNKNOWN*, *ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS* and *THE BEGINNING OF THE END* will have been previewed, so that I can give you some fresh thumb-nail sketches. If they haven't, it is predictable that Peter (Torquemado) Hamilton will have my thumbs—up to my elbows!

Kurt Neumann, the man who, for better or worse, made *ROCKETSHIP X-M* some years ago, starts tomorrow (as I write this) to direct a new scientifilm, *WAR OF THE UNIVERSE*.

One would suspect Frankenstein, most durable of monsters, of having feline blood somewhere in his ancestry, for he certainly is a perennially revived, indestructible creation. *CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN* will be the first British treatment of Mary Shelley's brainchild, while cisAtlantic the writing team of Budd Bankson and Larry Jackson is putting flesh and blood on the bony skeleton of a plot devised in the virus-fevered cranium of a confrere, Dr. Weaver Wright, of Miskatonic University, called

FRANKENSTEIN FROM SPACE.

Horace Gold's "nova"-rating story, **A MATTER OF FORM**, has been optioned. Man in a dog's body.

Wilson "Bob" Tucker's war novel of the future, **THE LONG LOUD SILENCE**, has been optioned. Sol Lesser Productions has purchased his **MAN FROM TOMORROW**, whose hero has the wild talent of telepathy.

THE VOLCANO MONSTERS screenplay assignment has been handed Ib J. Melchior and Ed Watson. Monsters are prehistoric survivals.

Richard Matheson is busy adapting **GULLIVER'S TRAVELS** to film.

Paul W. Fairman, editor of *Amazing Stories*, has had his own story **THE COSMIC FRAME** bought by American-International Pictures.

THE VALLEY OF INVISIBLE MEN by Edmond Hamilton has been optioned by screenplay collaborators Thad Swift and Norman Rice.

THE SLIME MAN will be produced in Cuba. Portions of **THE GIANT YMIR** have already been filmed in Italy; it is being completed in Hollywood, where it has been retitled **TWENTY MILLION MILES TO EARTH**. Mexican participation looks likely for the filming of **OPERATION SNOWMAN** by Bankson and Jackson. **THE THOUGHT-MONSTER** by Amelia Reynolds Long may be shot in England, which is also where Jack Williamson's **WOLVES OF DARKNESS** may be shot (with silver bullets, no doubt, they being werewolves). **MR. ADAM** will be shot (pity) in Germany.

Michael Lauler (Richard Osenburg) is developing his own *Bluebook* yarn, **UNDERSEA ARMADA**, into a full length novel which Geo. Fox Productions will film.

There's feature film interest in John Jessel's (Stanley Weinbaum's) **THE ADAPTIVE ULTIMATE**, which has already seen several televersions.

THE ADVENTURES OF TOM THUMB is a Geo. Pal project.

Sam Katzman has completed **THE NIGHT THE WORLD EXPLODED**.

Roger Corman has registered three titles: **KUTURO, KING OF THE DEEP**; **KROG, KING OF THE UNIVERSE**; and **KRALL, KING OF THE UNIVERSE**.

Frank Quattrocchi's **THE PROJECTED MAN** is near contract-talking stage at American-International.

And more than most all of the foregoing put together I think I look forward to seeing John Wyndham's **DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS**. They're doing his **OUT OF THE DEEPS** too, and that should be a wizard show, but **TRIFFIDS** is something Geo. Pal was almost sold on doing at one time. He contemplated combining it with an original treatment I was agenting called **BARRIER TO THE STARS** by Ken Crossen and the late Milt Luban, and although I'd have profited by a commission, as a film fan I'd still rather see a well-done version of the original unadulterated (just adult!) story. Thus say we all?

Next time surely: reel reviews.



WALTER A. WILLIS writes for you—

Perhaps science fiction fandom leaves you agog with indifference and you read this column only because you are compelled to by the sheer literary brilliance of my writing, or because you have inadvertently turned over two pages at once. Nevertheless you may have wondered, as you fumble hastily back to your proper place, what on earth people find to write about in all these fan magazines I keep talking about. Well, of course most of their contents are ephemeral stuff, but usually there is some controversy of lasting interest raging through the whole field, with skirmishes being fought out in fan magazines all over the world. Some years back, for instance, there was a battle of the so-called 'Shaver Mystery'; a series of stories based on a lunatic mish-mosh of weird ideas, such as that mankind was

being persecuted by an evil race called "deroes" who lived in caves under the earth. The editor claimed that they were true and built up a large circulation among the crackpot fringe. Science fiction fandom proper was of course furious, but the argument as to the best way of dealing with this menace to the good name of science fiction caused disturbances which reverberate to this day. Then somewhat later there was the dianetics battle, as fandom hostile, sympathetic or just bored stiff witnessed or assisted L. Ron Hubbard's eventful progress from pulp to pulpit.

The current controversy is "Has Science Fiction Lost Its Sense of Wonder?" and it's almost entirely the work of one man. New York fan Sam Moskowitz has been asking this question so loudly and so long

that by now practically everyone in fandom is trying to answer it, if only to keep him quiet. Sam's oft-reiterated view is that in the Twenties and Thirties science fiction had a simple and sincere appeal to the imagination which the clever literary-psychological stories of today have lost. They have, as it were, thrown out the baby of childlike wonder with the bathos water of bad writing. The usual answer, given most trenchantly by Damon Knight (whose brilliant reviews have now been anthologised in "In Search of Wonder," Advent, Chicago. \$4.00) is, simply, that Sam only thought those old stories were good because he was young when he read them. Another answer is that wonder isn't so easy to excite these days, with fantastic things in every morning's newspaper. This point of view was put with devastating effect in a story by Randy Garrett in the American fanmag "Inside." Purporting to be the first instalment of an old-type serial, it merely described the journey of the hero, Sam, to his office in the morning: but everything—the car, the subway train, etc.—was described in awed tones as a superscientific marvel, in a hilarious burlesque of the prolix style of the old masters.

For a long time I was pretty sure myself that the Knight school had the right answer: that was because I'd recently re-read all those great stories of

the Thirties I'd last read as a schoolboy. They were all tripe, every last dull one of them. I could work up not the slightest enthusiasm for the Cummings and goings of the cardboard heroes, nor even the blowing of planets into E. E. Smithereens. It was quite clear to me that no sf worth reading had been written in magazines prior to August, 1939. But then lately I've begun to realise that I don't care much for most present-day sf either. No doubt my palate is jaded, but I'm not sure that that's a sufficient answer. The question is, it seems to me, whether the sf of today is capable of putting stars in the eyes of the modern youngster, as the sf of the Thirties did in mine. If it's not, heaven help us all. Us old stagers will keep ploughing through the contemporary output looking for the unforgettable thrill we once knew, but there'll be no such lure for the new generation. It seems to me that most of today's high grade work is not science fiction in the old wondrous sense at all, but merely human interest fiction with a scientific background. Better written, of course, but the authors are so determined to be so sophisticated that they deliberately make the marvellous commonplace, as if space and the future were all old hat. Whereas I devoutly believe that not one author has so far even touched

the depth of emotions that will be felt by the first man to leave the Earth's atmosphere. Could we not have more authors with with stars in their eyes and fires in their bellies and an urge to the thrill of discovery?

REVIEWS

Meuh No. 2. Jean Linard, 24 Rue Petit, Vesoul, Hte. Sne, France. 1/6. This huge and wonderful *pot-pourri* is 100 pages long and is published by a Frenchman who started to learn English, by reading sf, only about a year ago. In its fantastic conglomeration of contents the principal item is a 26-page report on the recent New York Convention by Ron

Ellik, who hitch-hiked to it all the way from Los Angeles. Pungently written, the report is entitled "You Can't Sit Here," the villain of the piece being the Convention Chairman, whose allegedly officious restrictions infuriated Ellik. Naturally, after thumbing his way some 4,000 miles Ellik must have felt himself morally entitled to sit down anywhere he chose.

Eye No. 6, Joy & Vince Clarke, 7 Inchmery Road, Catford, London, S.E.6. 1/- Most interesting items this time are a long editorial by Joy and some very fine reviews by Vince. There is also a brilliant criticism in cartoon form by Arthur Thomson, of the film "Conquest of Space."

NEBULA No. 21 . . .

What is the best way of creating unity where, fundamentally, it does not exist? One interesting suggestion as to how this may be accomplished is contained in "Treason," by that well-known science-fiction author JOHN BRUNNER, in NEBULA No. 21.

Other outstanding stories in this issue are by E. R. JAMES, KENNETH BULMER and a host of other NEBULA favourites. Also in the same number is the result of the 1956 NEBULA Authors Award, where the author receiving the greatest number of votes for his stories in the magazine during that year will be announced. There will also be another beautifully illustrated scientific article in our regular Photo Feature section.

All these and many other good things are in store for you in NEBULA No. 21, out in two months. Order your copy today—and avoid disappointment.



GUIDED MISSIVES



Letters to the Editor

Dear Ed.: I studied NEBULA No. 18 with some interest. It is, I must admit, some time since I bought a copy, and possibly for this reason I am more easily able to discern the degree of advancement made since the early days. The reading matter—now apparently largely home grown and original—is greatly improved. Ted Tubb in particular has acquired a very glossy style and, in my opinion, his story is by far the best piece in this issue, although I felt some irritation when the protagonist turned out to be the villain. The reader was given an insight into Kenton's mind, but denied full knowledge—rather unfair. However Ted's hero was the most vivid character in this issue, and for that reason I'd place "Reluctant Farmer" first. I enjoyed John Brunner's 'atmospheric' story, and was pleased to see him represented in the line-up. William Temple's tale was disappointing. I found the characters too 'flat' to evoke any sympathy.

Returning to my appreciation of NEBULA's progress: in the art department there appears to be a condition of stasis. I feel sure that the garish childishness of the cover must deprive you of a great many readers, and the interior illustrations still remain

at the standard of one of the lesser fanzines. Your regular readers are, of course, not much worried by the standard of the artwork, but bookstall-browsers who might become regulars are inclined to judge the apple by its skin.

PETER RIDLEY,
London, S.E.9.

** Many thanks for your interesting letter Peter. As a matter of fact my new policy in relation to covers has proved to be extremely successful and since the appearance of James Stark circulation has shown a very satisfactory upward trend. I do admit that the artwork question is a very important one but my policy in choosing covers, etc. is merely dictated by experience gained by trial-and-error methods over the last four years or so since NEBULA first appeared. Circulation is the most important thing and contrary to your opinion "bookstall-browsers" seem to be reasonably satisfied with the quality of artwork which I now use although naturally the trial-and-error process will continue until something approaching that impossible state of perfection is reached.*

Dear Ed.: I've never written to NEBULA before, but I now think it is definitely time that I should. I have read every single issue, but, forgive me if I'm wrong, I cannot remember any direct criticism in your letter columns. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, quite possibly you've never received any. Anyway, here's some now. I really am fed up with a fair fraction of my 2/-'s worth appearing in the form of advertisements and oft-repeated letters demonstrating how good you are. For heaven's sake! If a mag. is really good it shouldn't need pages of boasting to lift your circulation; you'll get new readers anyway, and, on the strength of this alone, if it gets any worse, you're going to lose some old readers, me, for example.

D. E. GASKIN,
Croydon,
Surrey.

* *Thanks for the letter Mr. Gaskin. If indeed you have read the past issues of NEBULA I think you will agree that there has been a reasonable amount of criticism in the letter columns of the magazine since it first appeared. Indeed I have endeavoured to publish criticism and praise in the proportion in which they are received by letter at this office. Priority is always given to a letter which contains an interesting or new idea as distinct from comment on the magazine itself.*

You say you are "fed up" with a "fair fraction" of your 2/-'s worth appearing in the

form of advertisement and letters of praise. Taking NEBULA No. 18 as an example I would point out that throughout the entire issue two pages of a total of 112 were occupied by advertisements while only two letters out of a total of five were taken up by direct comment on the magazine while both contained a mixture of comment, criticism and appreciation.

Consequently in NEBULA No. 18 we had rather less than 1 per cent. of the issue taken up by advertisements and letters of praise or, looking at it from the monetary angle rather less than $\frac{1}{4}$ d. worth of your 2/-.

Dear Ed.: I have been a reader of NEBULA for some considerable time now and am writing to enquire why you have never to my knowledge published a "time" story in the magazine.

PAUL STEWART,
London W.C.2.

* *Many thanks for an interesting query Paul. The reason I tend to avoid time stories when selecting material for publication in NEBULA is that there are so many paradoxes and contradictions involved even in the simplest time travel yarn that it is very rarely that such a story bears the stamp of authenticity and conviction to say nothing of scientific accuracy which I endeavour to make the rule for all the stories printed in NEBULA. When someone writes a time story containing a satisfactory*

blend of these qualities you can rest assured it will appear in NEBULA.

Dear Ed.: I have been an avid Science Fiction reader for some years, but this is the first time I have been moved to burst into print. Mr. Donaldson's letter in No. 17 prodded me into it. His sweeping generalisations are not borne out by facts. Statistics show that the life expectancy of women is greater than that of men, also male suicides greatly outnumber female. How does Mr. Donaldson reconcile these figures with his statement that males stand up to mental and physical stress better than women?

In Russia, China and to a lesser extent the U.S.A. there are female soldiers, ships' captains, engineers, business executives, miners, etc., and as for women quote "finding whole hosts of jobs too dirty or nasty to do" this seems to be just nonsense.

He speaks of women's role as childbearers and raisers. What a poor opinion of Nature he must have, if, as he infers, she leaves the bearing and all important early care and training of the helpless human young to the inferior half of the human race.

So a woman's decisions are perpetually coloured by emotion? Do not despise emotion Mr. Donaldson. Even a robot can make decisions but only human beings possess emotions, and remember, intellect is sexless.

Also, Mr. Donaldson's own opinions are coloured by emotion. He possesses prejudice unsupported by facts. Prejudice is an emotion compounded of

resentment and fear. Perhaps an overbearing female relative has left him with hidden resentment from childhood of maybe having found himself unattractive to females he finds it necessary to his ego to find them and therefore their opinions, inferior? (Can you decry feminine imagination after that bit, Mr. Donaldson?).

He states that women's emotionalism prevents them from becoming Prime Ministers, etc. He must read the papers. Does he seriously contend that the present world situation is the outcome of the calm and logical outlook of its leaders? Is it not rather the result of the emotions of hate, fear, greed and envy on the part of the whole human race? Yes, women are to blame, too, after all, in one or two countries they have had the vote for forty years or so.

By the way, Mr. Donaldson wants his answer scientific. Well, it has been advanced as a probability by several learned biologists that in the dim past our progenitors were hermaphrodites but changing environment brought about specialisation of pursuits and functions and physical differences evolved as a natural consequence. Remember that the race environment and way of life now obviates this need for specialisation—what if Evolution should turn the wheel full circle! But being perfectly logical and unswayed by weak emotionalism you will find nothing objectionable in this thought. Certainly men and women differ slightly, but these differences are complimentary and in no way constitute inferiority on either side. It is

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1957 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below and post it to NEBULA, 159, Crownpoint Rd., Glasgow, S.E., immediately.

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Man of Imagination | |
| Men Marched Out | |
| Better Than We Know | |
| One Man | |
| Beacon Green | |

Name and Address

R. Town, of Sussex, wins the One Guinea Prize offered in NEBULA No. 18. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:—

- | | |
|----------------------|-------|
| 1. RELUCTANT FARMER | |
| By E. C. Tubb | 23.6% |
| 2. T | |
| By Brian W. Aldiss | 19.9% |
| 2. OUTSIDE POSITION | |
| By William F. Temple | 19.9% |
| 4. ARMISTICE | |
| By Arthur Sellings | 13.7% |
| 5. HOPE DEFERRED | |
| By John Brunner | 13.3% |
| 6. MORE THAN HORMONE | |
| By Dan Morgan | 9.6% |

The result of the Poll on the stories in this issue will appear in NEBULA No. 22.

my opinion, for such as it's worth, that men and women working together in *any* sphere make a perfect team, and I hope that by the end of the century at the latest, people will be able to develop their talents irrespective of sex. The present set-up of society will have to be modified to make this possible.

Mrs. BARBARA SPORK,

Perth,

W. Australia.

** I really feel somewhat inadequate to answer such a passionate feminine broadside, Barbara, so we will just have to leave Mr. Donaldson to undertake this duty in a future letter column.*

Dear Ed.: You have been asking for some comments from the Aussies in your magazine, well mate cop this.

The cover of No. 16 was bonzer, while that on No. 17 was not so good. The illustrations of No. 16 were extra good but the quality dropped off in No. 17. The quality of the stories did not drop off though, they are of extra good standard, particularly "Frontier Encounter," which is, in my opinion, the best science fiction story I have ever read.

How about a story with an Australian background in it? Also a little more scientific data in your stories.

Keep up the good work and yours will always be tops with me, fair dinkum it will.

L. W. PAULL,

Goulburn,

Australia.

** Thanks for the letter—and Waltzing Matilda to you, too.*

THE MODERN MARS

Continued from inside front cover

In spite of the fact that Mars is better observed from the Southern Hemisphere of Earth, observatories in the Northern Hemisphere deployed a battery of new equipment to ferret out the secrets hidden under the fifty-mile deep skin of Martian atmosphere. Blocking ultra violet light, only the top of the Martian atmosphere can be photographed with blue sensitive plates. The atmosphere is only one-tenth as dense as Earth's and 98.5 per cent of it is inert nitrogen—free oxygen is virtually absent.

But outside the atmosphere Phobos, it has been calculated, is spiralling down onto its primary and will crash onto the surface in 35 million years.

The atmosphere of Earth is the prime villain in preventing good seeing, the continuous wavering over an image as small as the disc of Mars blurs detail. Hitherto, the maps that are in such dispute have been drawn from the memory of a split-second flash of human vision. So the Lumicon, television camera, has been developed to amplify faint light 50,000 times. With a large telescope and a cine camera it enables sharp photographs to be taken in a hundredth or less of a second.

The surface of Mars can be seen only in red light, but the 200-inch Mount Palomar telescope, using a fifth of a second exposure time, has in the past shown only hazy smears in vague resemblance to the hand observed and drawn continental configurations so widely reproduced. Two-thirds of the surface is covered by brick-red areas. Astronomers now regard these expanses as frigid deserts, where a chill wind moans for ever over the ruin of a planet.

In 1877, using a low-powered telescope, Schiaparelli saw something which originated the fiercest astronomical discussion of all time. His reported *canali* have been sworn to by noted astronomers and as equally damned by others. At this moment, no one knows the facts. Lowell suggested that the canals were artificial in 1894; today, although the evidence is piling up against there being canals at all, no one can flatly contradict him.

Photographs have never revealed signs of canals. That there are surface markings is undeniable, and the most likely theory is that these scattered dots link up into lines when seen at the limit of human vision, as has been shown by experiments.

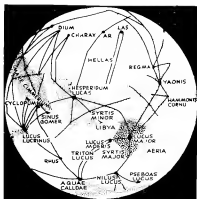
Other astronomers have calculated elaborate tables of railway networks, spiders' webs, cracks in china and laval rocks, and put their regularity and their similarity to the reported canals forward as evidence that intelligent creatures *might* have constructed the canals.

Even droppings along game trails, leading to a heavier growth of vegetation along those lines, by succeeding generations of animals have been advanced as a possible explanation.

But when all the world waited for some concrete proof, optical vision was sadly impaired by a violet haze that surrounded the tantalising disc of Mars as it swung into its closest approach to Earth. Mars had drawn a violet cloak of obscurity about him.

Astronomers today do not rely altogether on light waves for information from the planets. Quite recently Mars was added to the list of 'radio-sources' in the sky. Along with the Sun and the incredibly remote outer galaxies, Mars broadcasts radio waves. They are picked up on the 3cm wavelength, and although there is no single intelligent call among them, astronomers calculate that they indicate the average surface temperature of the planet. It is a chill zero degrees Centigrade.

By the time the next close approach occurs in 1971, there may well be intelligent radio messages coming from Mars—transmitted from the robot spaceships sent out by exploring Man.





Another scan
by
cape1736

